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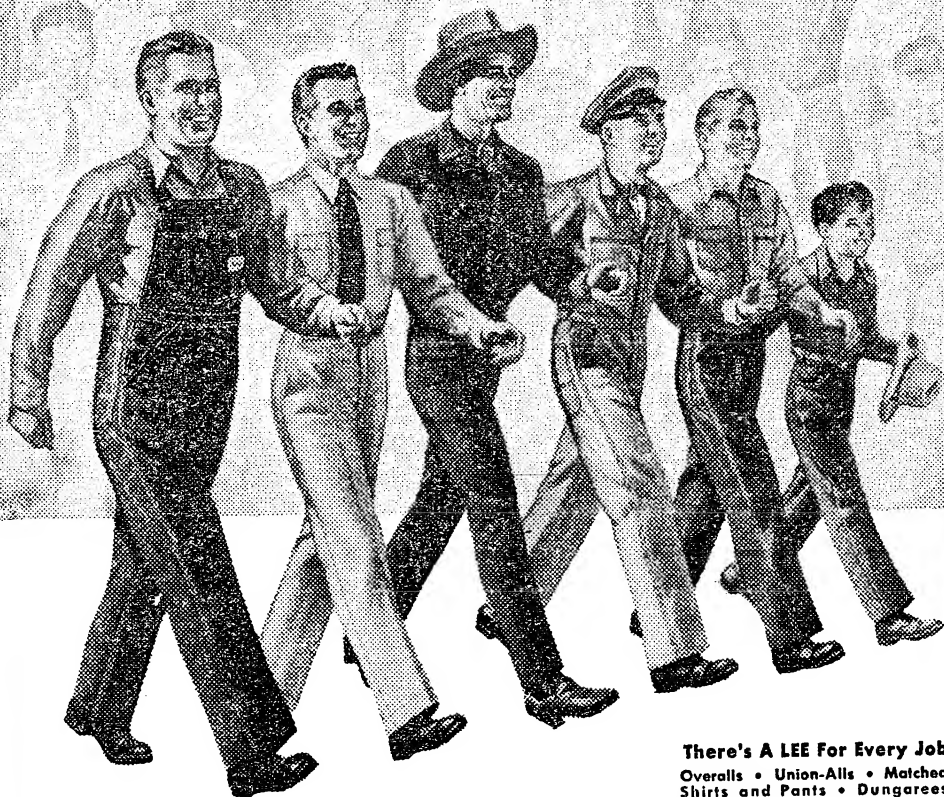
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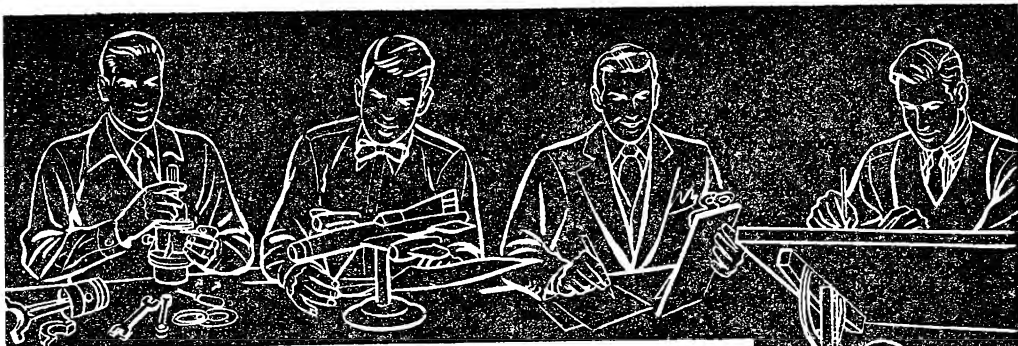
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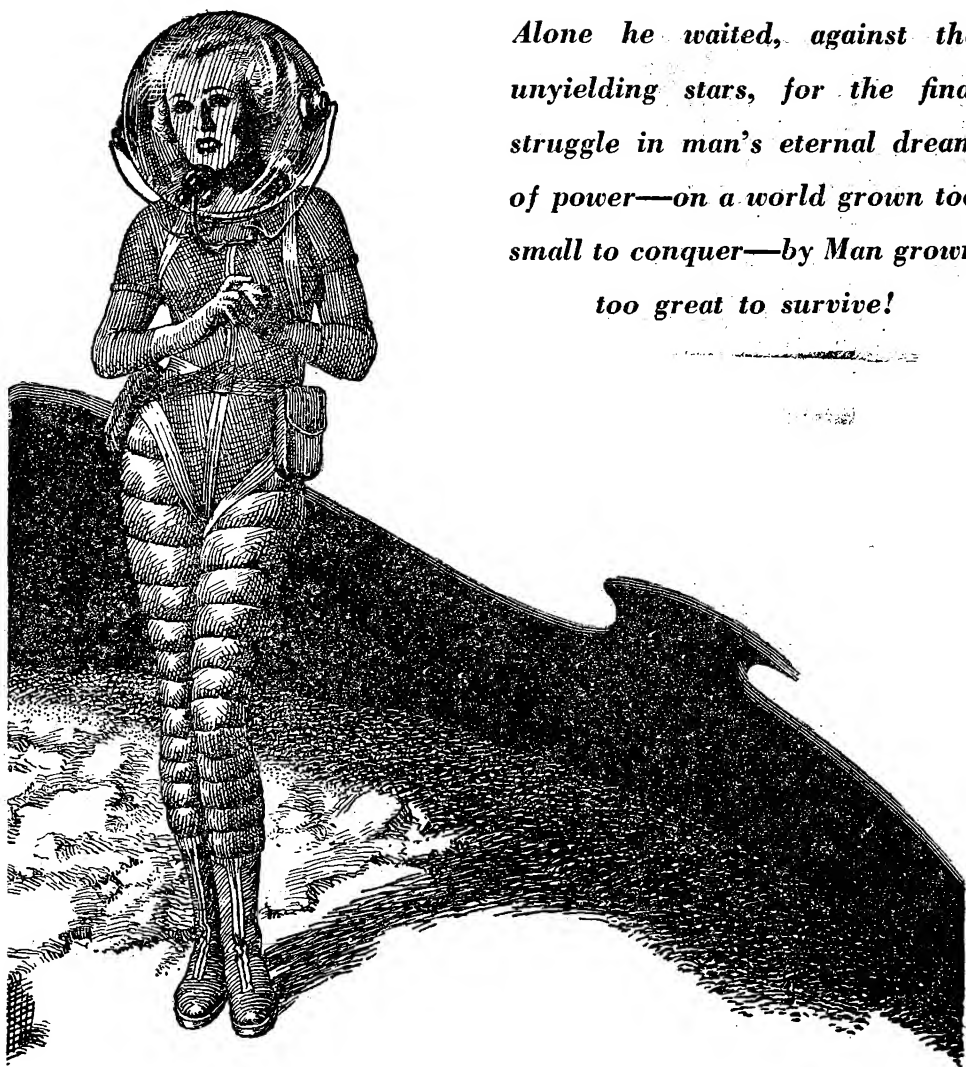
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**FREDRIC BROWN**



He kept between Evadne and Olliver, so she wouldn't have to see. . . .



*Alone he waited, against the  
unyielding stars, for the final  
struggle in man's eternal dream  
of power—on a world grown too  
small to conquer—by Man grown  
too great to survive!*

# GATEWAY TO DARKNESS

**T**HERE was this Crag, and he was a thief and a smuggler and a murderer. He'd been a spaceman once and he had a metal hand and a permanent squint to show for it. Those, and a taste for exotic liquors and a strong disinclina-

tion for work. Especially as he would have had to work a week to buy one small jigger of even the cheapest of the fluids that were the only things that made life worthwhile to him. At anything he was qualified to do, that is, except stealing,



smuggling and murder. These paid well.

He had no business in Albuquerque, but he got around. And that time they caught him. It was for something he hadn't done, but they had proof that he did it. Proof enough to send him to the penal colony of Callisto, which he wouldn't have minded too much, or to send him to the psycher, which he would have minded very much indeed.

He sat on the bed in his cell and worried about it, and about the fact that he needed a drink. The two worries went together, in a way. If they sent him to the psycher, he'd never want a drink again, and he wanted to want a drink.

The psycher was pretty bad. They used it only in extreme cases, partly because they hadn't perfected it yet. Sometimes—statistically about one time out of nine—it drove its subject crazy, stark raving crazy. The eight times out of nine that it worked, it was worse. It *adjusted* you; it made you normal. And in the process it killed your memories, the good ones as well as the bad ones, and you started from scratch.

You remembered how to talk and feed yourself and how to use a slipstick or play a flute—if, that is, you knew how to use a slipstick or play a flute before you went to the psycher. But you didn't remember your name unless they told you. And you didn't remember the time you were tortured for three days and two nights on Venus before the rest of the crew found you and took you away from the animated vegetables who didn't like meat in any form and especially in human form. You didn't remember the time you were space-mad, the time you went nine days without water, the time—well, you didn't remember anything that had ever happened to you.

Not even the good things.

You started from scratch, a different person. And Crag thought he wouldn't mind dying, particularly, but he didn't

want his body to keep on walking around afterwards, animated by a well-adjusted stranger, who just wouldn't be *he*.

So he paced up and down his cell and made up his mind that he'd at least try to kill himself before he'd let them strap him into the psycher chair, if it came to that.

He hoped that he could do it. He had a lethal weapon with him, the only one he ever carried, but it would be difficult to use on himself. Oh, it could be done if he had the guts; but it takes plenty of guts to kill yourself with a bludgeon, even so efficient a one as his metal hand. Looking at that hand, though it was obviously of metal, no one ever guessed that it weighed twelve pounds instead of a few ounces. The outside layer was Alloy G, a fraction of the weight of magnesium, not much heavier, in fact, than balsa wood. And since you couldn't mistake the appearance of Alloy G, nobody ever suspected that under it was steel for strength and under the steel lead for weight. It wasn't a hand you'd want to be slapped in the face with. But long practice and the development of strength in his left arm enabled him to carry it as casually as though it weighed the three or four ounces you'd expect it to weigh.

He quit pacing and went to the window and stood looking down at the huge sprawling city of Albuquerque, capital of SW Sector of North America, third largest city in the world since it had become the number one spaceport of the Western Hemisphere.

The window wasn't barred but the transparent plastic of the pane was tough stuff. Still, he thought he could batter through it with one hand, if that hand were his left one. But he could only commit suicide that way. There was a sheer drop of thirty stories from this, the top floor of the SW Sector Capitol Building.

For a moment he considered it and then he remembered that it was only probable,

not certain, that they'd send him to the psycher. The Callisto penal colony—well, that wasn't so good, either, but there was always at least a remote chance of escape from Callisto. Enough of a chance that he wouldn't jump out of any thirtieth-story windows to avoid going there. Maybe not even to avoid staying there.

But if he had a chance, after being ordered to the psycher, it would be an easier way of killing himself than the one he'd thought of first.

A voice behind him said, "Your trial has been called for fourteen-ten. That is ten minutes from now. Be ready."

He turned around and looked at the grille in the wall from which the mechanical voice had come. He made a raspberry sound at the grille—not that it did any good, for it was strictly a one-way communicator—and turned back to the window.

He hated it, that sprawling corrupt city out there, scene of intrigue—as were all other cities—between the Guilds and the Gilded. Politics rampant upon a field of muck, and everybody, except the leaders, caught in the middle. He hated Earth; he wondered why he'd come back to it this time.

After a while the voice behind him said, "Your door is now unlocked. You will proceed to the end of the corridor outside it, where you will meet the guards who will escort you to the proper room."

He caught the distant silver flash of a spaceship coming in; he waited a few seconds until it was out of sight behind the buildings. He didn't wait any longer than that because he knew this was a test. He'd heard of it from others who'd been here. You could sit and wait for the guards to come and get you, or you could obey the command of the speaker and go to meet them. If you ignored the order and made them come to you, it showed you were not adjusted; it was a point against you when the time came for your sentence.

So he went out into the corridor and along it; there was only one way to go. A hundred yards along the corridor two uniformed guards were waiting near an automatic door. They were armed with holstered heaters.

He didn't speak to them nor they to him. He fell in between them and the door opened by itself as they approached it. He knew it wouldn't have opened for him alone. He knew, too, that he could easily take both of them before either could draw a heater. A backhand blow to the guard on his left and then a quick swing across to the other one.

But getting down those thirty stories to the street would be something else again. A chance in a million, with all the safeguards between here and there.

So he walked between them down the ramp to the floor below and to the door of one of the rooms on that floor. And through the door.

HE WAS the last arrival, if you didn't count the two guards who came in after him. The others were waiting. The six jurors in the box; of whom three would be Guilders and three Gilded. The two attorneys—one of whom had talked to him yesterday in his cell and had told him how hopeless things looked. The operator of the recording machine. And the judge.

He glanced at the judge and almost let an expression of surprise show on his face. The judge was Jon Olliver.

Crag quickly looked away. He wondered what the great Jon Olliver was doing here, judging an unimportant criminal case. Jon Olliver was a great man, one of the few statesmen, as against politicians, of the entire System. Six months ago Olliver had been the Guild candidate for Coordinator of North America. He'd lost the election, but surely he would have retained a more important niche for himself, in the party if not in the government,

than an ordinary criminal judge's job.

True, Olliver had started his political career as a judge; four years ago he'd been on the bench the one previous time Crag had been arrested and tried. The evidence had, that time, been insufficient and the jury had freed him. But he still remembered the blistering jeremiad Olliver had delivered to him afterward, in the private conversation between judge and accused that was customary whether the latter was convicted or acquitted.

Ever since, Crag had hated Jon Olliver as a man, and had admired him as a judge and as a statesman, after Olliver had gone into politics and had so nearly been elected Coördinator.

But Coördinator was the highest position to which any man could aspire. The only authority higher was the Council of Coördinators, made up of seven Coördinators of Earth and four from the planets, one from each major planet inhabited by the human race. The Council of Coördinators was the ultimate authority in the Solar System, which, since interstellar travel looked a long way off, meant the ultimate authority in the known-to-be-inhabited universe. So it seemed almost incredible to Crag that a man who'd almost been a Coördinator should now, in the six months since his candidacy, have dropped back down to the unimportant job he'd held five years ago. But that was politics for you, he thought, in this corrupt age; an honest man didn't have a chance.

No more of a chance than he was going to have against this frameup the police had rigged against him.

The trial started and he knew he'd been right. The evidence was there—on recording tapes; there were no witnesses—and it proved him completely guilty. It was false, but it sounded true. It took only ten minutes or so to run it off. The prosecuting attorney took no longer; he didn't have to. His own attorney made a weak and fumbling—but possibly sincere

—effort to disprove the apparently obvious.

And that was that. The jury went out and stayed all of a minute, and came back. The plaintiff was found guilty as charged.

Judge Jon Olliver said briefly, "Indeterminate sentence on Callisto."

The technician shut off the recording machine; the trial was over.

Crag let nothing show on his face, although there was relief in his mind that it had not been the psycher. Not too much relief; he'd have killed himself if it had been, and death wasn't much worse than life on Callisto. And he knew that indeterminate sentence on Callisto meant life sentence—unless he volunteered to be psyched. That was what an indeterminate sentence really meant; it gave the convicted his choice between a life sentence and the psycher.

A signal from the judge and the others began to leave. Crag did not move; he knew without being told that he was expected to wait for the customary private conversation with the judge. That always came after the sentencing and, in very rare cases, could make a change in the sentence. Sometimes, but not often, after private conversation with a prisoner a judge lessened or increased the sentence; he had power to do so up to twenty-four hours after his original pronouncement.

It was optional with the judge whether the guards remained; if he thought there was a possibility of the prisoner attempting physical violence, he could have them remain, with heaters ready, but back out of hearing range in a far corner of the room. That was what Olliver had done the last time Crag had appeared before him, after the acquittal. Undoubtedly it was because he had recognized the violence in Crag and had feared to provoke him by the things he was going to say.

But this time Olliver signaled to the guards to leave the room with the others.

Crag stepped forward. He thought, *I*



can reach across that bench and kill him easily. He was tempted, simply by how easy it would be, even though he knew that it would mean the psycher—or his own private alternative.

Olliver said, "Don't do it, Crag."

Crag didn't answer. He didn't intend to, unless he found himself provoked beyond endurance by what he was going to have to hear. But he knew the best way to handle one of these interviews was to keep it strictly a one-way conversation by refusing to talk back. Silence might annoy Olliver, but it would not annoy him sufficiently to make him increase the sentence. And nothing he could say would make Olliver lessen it.

"You'd be sorry if you did, Crag. Because I'm not going to ride you this time. In fact, I'm going to make you a proposition."

What kind of a proposition, Crag wondered, could a judge want to make to a man he'd just sentenced to life on Callisto? But he didn't ask; he waited.

Olliver smiled. His face was handsome when he smiled.

He leaned forward across the bench. He said softly, "Crag, how would you like your freedom, and a million credits?"

## CHAPTER TWO

### Escape to Danger

Crag said hoarsely, "You're kidding. And if you are—"

He must have swayed forward or, without knowing it, started to lift his hand, for Olliver jerked back and his face was a bit white as he said "Don't" again, this time sharply.

And he went on, fast: "I'm not—kidding, Crag. A million credits, enough to keep you drunk the rest of your life. Freedom. And a chance to help humanity, to pull the human race out of the bog into which it has sunk in this period of man-

kind's decadence. A rare chance, Crag."

Crag said, "Save that for your speeches, Judge. The hell with humanity. But I'll settle for my freedom and a million. One thing, though. This trial was a frameup. I didn't do it. Was it *your* frameup?"

Olliver shook his head slowly. He said, "No, not mine. But I rather suspected it was framed. The evidence was too good. You don't leave evidence like that, do you, Crag?"

Crag didn't bother to answer that. He asked, "Who did it, then?"

"The police, I imagine. There's an election coming up—and the Commissioner's office is elective. A few convictions like yours will look good on the records. You're pretty well known, Crag, in spite of the fact that there's never been a conviction against you. The newscasts from the stations on the Gilded side are going to give Commissioner Green plenty of credit for getting you."

It sounded logical. Crag said, "I know what I'm going to do with part of my freedom, then."

Olliver's voice was sharp again. "Not until after, Crag. I don't care what you do—after the job I want you to do for me. You agree to that?"

Crag shrugged. "Okay. What's the job?" He didn't really care what it was, or even how risky it was. For the difference between life on Callisto and freedom and a million, he couldn't think of anything he wouldn't do. He'd try it even if there was one chance in a thousand of his pulling it off and staying alive.

Olliver said, "This isn't the time or place to tell you about it; we shouldn't talk too long. You'll be a free man when we talk. That much comes first. The million comes afterwards, if you succeed."

"And if I turn down the job after you've let me go?"

"I don't think you will. It's not an easy one, but I don't think you'll turn it down for a million, even if you're already

free. And there might be more for you in it than just money—but we won't talk about that unless you succeed. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough. But—I want to be sure about this framing business. Do you mean to tell me it was just coincidence that you wanted me to do something for you and that I got framed and you sat on the case?"

Olliver smiled again. "It's a small world, Crag. And it's partly a coincidence, but not as much of a one as you think. First, you're not the only man in the system that could—do what I want done. You're one of several I had in mind. Possibly the best, I'll give you that. I was wondering how to contact one of you. And I saw your name on the docket and requested to sit on the case. You should know enough about law to know that a judge can ask to sit on a case if he has had previous experience with the accused."

Crag nodded. That was true, and it made sense.

Olliver said, "But to brass tacks; we shouldn't be talking much longer than this. I don't want any suspicion to attach to me when you escape."

"Escape?"

"Of course. You were judged guilty, Crag, and on strong evidence. I couldn't possibly free you legally; I couldn't even have given you a lighter sentence than I did. If I freed you now, I'd be impeached. But I—or perhaps I should say *we*—can arrange for you to escape. Today, shortly after you're returned to your cell to await transportation to Callisto."

"Who's *we*?" Crag asked.

"A new political party, Crag, that's going to bring this world—the whole System—out of the degradation into which it has sunk. It's going to end the bribery and corruption. It's going to take us back to old-fashioned democracy by ending the deadlock between the Guilds and the Syn-

dicates. It's going to be a middle-of-the-road party. We're going to bring honest government back and—" He stopped and grinned boyishly. "I didn't mean to start a lecture. In which I suppose you aren't interested anyway. We call ourselves the Cooperationists."

"You're working under cover?"

"For the present. Not much longer. In a few months we come into the open, in time to start gathering support—votes—for the next elections." He made a sudden impatient gesture. "But I'll tell you all this later, when we're at leisure. Right now the important thing is your escape."

"You'll be taken back to your cell when I give the signal that we're through talking. I'll put on the record that you were intransigent and unrepentant and that I am making no modification of your sentence. Within an hour from your return, arrangements for your escape will be made and you'll be told what to do."

"Told how?"

"By the speaker in your cell. They're on private, tap-proof circuits. A member of the party has access to them. Simply follow instructions and you'll be free by seventeen hours."

"And then? If I still want to earn the million?"

"Come to my house. It's listed; you can get the address when you need it. Be there at twenty-two."

"It's guarded?" Crag asked. He knew that houses of most important political figures were.

"Yes. And I'm not going to tell the guards to let you in. They're not party members. I think they're in the pay of the opposition, but that's all right with me. I use them to allay suspicion."

"How do I get past them, then?"

Olliver said, "If you can't do that, without help or advice from me, then you're not the man I think you are, Crag—and you're not the man I want. But don't kill unless you have to. I don't like violence.

unless it's absolutely necessary and in a good cause. I don't *like* it even then, but—"

He glanced at his wrist watch and then reached out and put his finger on a button on one side of the bench. He asked, "Agreed?" and as Crag nodded, he pushed the button.

The two guards came back in. Olliver said, "Return the prisoner to his cell."

One on each side of him, they led him back up the ramp to the floor above and escorted him all the way to his cell.

THE DOOR clanged. Crag sat down on the bed and tried to puzzle things out. He wasn't modest enough about his particular talents to wonder why Olliver had chosen him if he had a dirty job to be done. But he was curious what dirty job a man like Olliver would have to offer. If there was an honest and fair man in politics, Olliver was that man. It must be something of overwhelming importance if Olliver was sacrificing his principles to expediency.

Well, he, Crag, certainly had nothing to lose, whether he trusted Olliver's motives or not. And he thought he trusted them.

He went back to the window and stood there looking down at the teeming city, thinking with wonder how greatly his fortunes had changed in the brief space of an hour and a half. That long ago he'd stood here like this and wondered whether to batter through the plastic pane and throw himself from the window. Now he was not only to be free but to have a chance at more money than he'd ever hoped to see in one sum.

When an hour was nearly up, he went over and stood by the speaker grille so he would not miss anything that came over it. One cannot ask questions over a one-way communicator, and he'd have to get every word the first time.

It was well that he did. The voice, when it came, was soft—and it was a wom-

an's voice. From the window he could have heard it, but might have missed part of the message. "I have just moved the switch that unlocks your cell door," the voice said. "Leave your cell and walk as you did on your way to the courtroom. I will meet you at the portal, at the place where two guards met you before."

The cell door was unlocked, all right. He went through it and along the corridor.

A woman waited for him. She was beautiful; not even the severe costume of a technician could completely conceal the soft, lush curves of her body; not even the fact that she wore horn-rimmed spectacles and was completely without make-up could detract from the beauty of her face. Her eyes, even through glass, were the darkest, deepest blue he had ever seen, and her hair—what showed of it beneath the technician's beret—was burnished copper.

He stared at her as he came near. And hated her, partly because she was a woman and partly because she was so beautiful. But mostly because her hair was exactly the same color as Lea's had been.

She held out a little metal bar. "Take this," she told him. "Put it in your pocket. It's radioactive; without it or without a guard with you who has one, every portal here is a death-trap."

"I know," he said shortly.

A paper, folded small, was next. "A diagram," she said, "showing you a way out along which, if you're lucky, you'll encounter no guards. In case you do—"

A pocket-size heater was the next offering, but he shook his head at that. "Don't want it," he told her. "Don't need it."

She put the gun back into her own pocket without protest, almost as though she had expected him to refuse it.

"One more thing," she said. "A visitor's badge. It won't help you on the upper three levels, but below that, it will keep anyone from asking you questions."

He took that, and put it on right away.



"Anything else?"

"Only this. Ten yards ahead, to your right, is a lavatory. Go in there and lock the door. Memorize this diagram thoroughly and then destroy it. And remember that if you're caught, it will do no good to tell the truth; your word won't mean a thing against—you know whose."

He smiled grimly. "I won't be caught," he assured her. "I might be killed, but I won't be caught."

Their eyes locked for a second, and then she turned quickly without speaking again and went through a door behind her.

He went on along the corridor, through the portal. In the lavatory he memorized the diagram quickly but thoroughly and then destroyed it. He had nothing to lose by following orders implicitly.

There was another portal before he came to the ramp. The radioactive bar she'd given him prevented whatever death-trap it concealed from operating.

He made the twenty-ninth level and the twenty-eighth without having met anyone. The next one, the twenty-seventh, would be the crucial one; the first of the three floors of cells and courtrooms. Despite that diagram, he didn't believe that there wouldn't be at least one guard between that floor and the one below, the top floor to which elevators went and the public—with visitor's permits—was allowed.

The ramp ended at the twenty-seventh floor. He had to go out into the corridor there, and to another ramp that led to the floor below. He felt sure there would be a guard at the door that led from the end of that ramp to freedom. And there was. He walked very quietly down the ramp. There was a sharp turn at the bottom of it and he peered around the turn cautiously. A guard was sitting there at the door, all right.

He smiled grimly. Either Olliver or the woman technician must have known the guard was there. It was only common sense that there'd be a guard at that cru-

cial point, in addition to any death-trap that might be in the door itself. Olliver didn't want him unless he was good enough to do at least part of his own jail-breaking.

And, of all things, to have offered him a heater-gun. That would really have been fatal. There, right over the guard's head, was a hemispherical blister on the wall that could only be a thermocouple, set to give off an alarm at any sharp increase in temperature. A heater ray, whether fired by or at a guard, would give an immediate alarm that would alert the whole building and stop the elevators in their shafts. A fat lot of good that heater would have done him, and the gorgeous technician who'd offered it to him must have known that.

Crag studied the guard. A big, brutish man, the kind who would fire first and ask questions afterward, despite the visitor's badge Crag wore. And there was a heater in the guard's hand, lying ready in his lap. With a different type of man, or even with a ready-to-shoot type with a holstered heater, Crag could have made the six paces. But, with this guard, he didn't dare risk it.

He stepped back and quickly unstrapped the twelve-pound hand from his wrist and held it in his right hand. He stepped into sight, pulling back his right arm as he did so.

The guard looked up—Crag hadn't even tried to be silent—and started to raise the heater. It was almost, but not quite, pointed at Crag when the heavy artificial hand struck him full in the face. He never pulled the trigger of the heater. He'd never pull a trigger again.

Crag walked to him and got his hand back, strapping it on again quickly. He picked up the guard's heater, deliberately handling it by the barrel to get his fingerprints on it. They'd know who killed the guard anyway—and he'd rather have them wonder how he'd taken the guard's own

weapon away from him and bashed his face in with it than have them guess how he *had* killed the guard. That method of killing was part of his stock in trade. A trade secret. Whenever he killed with it and there was time afterwards, he left evidence in the form of some other heavy blunt instrument that the police would think had been used.

He went through the door, using the key that had hung from the guard's belt, and whatever death-trap had been in the portal of it didn't operate. He could thank the girl technician for that much, anyway. She—or Olliver—had given him a fair break, knowing that without that radioactive bar, it would have been almost impossible for him to escape. Yes, they'd given him a fair chance.

Even if she hadn't told him to get rid of the bar here and now. It would have been bad if he hadn't known that, outside of the sacred precincts, those bars sometimes worked in reverse and set off alarms in elevators or at the street entrance. The guards never carried theirs below the twenty-sixth level. So he got rid of the bar in a waste receptacle by the elevator shafts before he rang for an elevator. The waste receptacle might conceivably have been booby-trapped for radioactive bars. But he took a chance because he didn't want to put it down in plain sight. No alarm went off.

A few minutes later he was safely on the street, lost in the crowd and reasonably safe from pursuit.

**A** CLOCK told him that it was now sixteen o'clock; he had six hours before his appointment with Olliver. But he wasn't going to wait until twenty-two; the police might expect him to go to Olliver's house—not for the real reason he was going there, but to avenge himself on the judge who had sentenced him. As soon as he was missed, that house would be watched more closely than

it was now. That was only common sense.

He looked up the address and took an atocab to within two blocks of it. He scouted on foot and spotted two guards, one at the front and one at the back. It would have been easy to kill either of them, but that would have defeated his purpose. It would definitely have focused the search for him on Olliver's house.

Getting into the house to hide would be equally dangerous; before they posted additional guards they'd search thoroughly.

The house next door was the answer; it was the same height and the roofs were only ten feet apart. And it wasn't guarded. But he'd better get in now. Later there might be a cordon around the whole block.

He took a tiny picklock out of the strap of his artificial hand: a bent wire as large as a small hairpin but as strong as a steel rod; and let himself in the door as casually as a returning householder would use his key. There were sounds at the back of the house, but he drew no attention as he went quietly up the stairs. He found the way out to the roof but didn't use it yet. Instead, he hid himself in the closet of what seemed to be an extra, unused bedroom.

He waited out five hours there, until it was almost twenty-two o'clock, and then let himself out on the roof. Being careful not to silhouette himself, he looked down and around. There were at least a dozen more vehicles parked on the street before Olliver's house and in the alley back of it than there should have been in a neighborhood like this one. The place was being watched, and closely.

The big danger was being seen during the jump from one roof to the next. But apparently no one saw him, and he landed lightly, as an acrobat lands. The sound he made might have been heard in the upstairs room immediately below him, but no farther. His picklock let him in the

door from the roof to the stairs and at the foot of them, the second floor, he waited for two or three minutes until utter silence convinced him there was no one on that floor.

He heard faint voices as he went down the next flight of steps to the first floor. One voice was Olliver's and the other that of a woman. He listened outside the door and when, after a while, he'd heard no other voices, he opened it and walked in.

Jon Olliver was seated behind a massive mahogany desk. For once, as he saw Crag, his poker face slipped. There was surprise in his eyes as well as in his voice as he said, "How in Heaven's name did you make it, Crag? I quit expecting you after I found the search was centering here. I thought you'd get in touch with me later, if at all."

Crag was looking at the woman. She was the technician who had given him his start toward freedom that afternoon. At least her features were the same. But she didn't wear the glasses now, and the technician's cap didn't hide the blazing glory of her hair. And, although the severe uniform she'd worn that afternoon hadn't hidden the voluptuousness of her figure, the gown she wore now accentuated every line of it. In the latest style, bare-midriffed, there was only a wisp of material above the waist. And the long skirt fitted her hips and thighs as a sheath fits a sword.

She was unbelievably beautiful.

She smiled at Crag, but spoke to Olliver. She said, "What does it matter *how* we got here, Jon? I told you he'd come."

Crag pulled his eyes away from her with an effort and looked at Olliver.

Olliver smiled too, now. He looked big and blond and handsome, like his campaign portraits.

He said, "I suppose that's right, Crag. It doesn't matter how you got here. And there's no use talking about the past. We'll get to brass tacks. But let's get one

more thing straight, first—an introduction."

He inclined his head toward the woman standing beside the desk. "Crag, Evadne. My wife."

## CHAPTER THREE

Evadne

C RAG almost laughed. It was the first time Olliver had been stupid. To think— Well, it didn't matter. He ignored it.

"Are we through horsing around now?" he asked.

Apparently Olliver either didn't recognize the archaic expression or didn't know what Crag meant by it. He raised his eyebrows. "What do you mean, Crag?"

"Making me take unnecessary risks just to show you how good I am."

"Oh, that. Yes, we're through horsing around. Pull up a chair, Crag. You sit down too, Evadne."

When they were comfortable, Olliver said, "First the background, Crag. You know the general political situation, but from the outside you probably don't know how bad it is."

"I know enough," Crag said.

"A two-party system, but both crooked. The only fortunate thing is the reasonably close balance of power between them. The Guilds—powerful organizations that evolved out of the workmen's unions of half a dozen centuries ago, pitted against the Syndicates—the Gilded—ruthless groups of capitalists and their reactionary satellites. The Guilds using intimidation as their weapon and the Gilded using bribery. Each group honeycombed with spies of the other—"

"I know all that."

"Of course. A third party, a middle-of-the-road one, is now being organized, under cover. We must get a certain amount of capital and of power before we can come out into the open." He smiled. "Or

they'll slap us down before we get really started."

"All I want to know," said Crag, "is what you want me to do. You can skip the build-up."

"All right. A certain man has a certain invention. He doesn't know it's valuable. I do. With that invention, our party could have unlimited funds. Billions. We've raised a war chest of several million among ourselves already. But it isn't enough. A party, these days, needs billions."

"Sounds simple," Crag said, "but have you offered the inventor the million you offered me?"

"He won't sell at any price. For one thing, he's immensely wealthy already, and a million wouldn't mean anything to him. For another, the thing is incidentally a weapon and it would be illegal for him to sell it."

"What do you mean, *incidentally* a

weapon?" Crag looked at him narrowly.

"That's its primary purpose, what it was made to be. But it's not a very efficient weapon; it kills, but it takes too long. It takes seconds, and whoever you killed with it could get you before he died. And the range is very limited.

"Its real importance, which he does not realize, lies in a by-product of its action."

Crag said, "All right, that part's none of my business. But tell me who and where the guy lives and what I'm looking for."

Olliver said, "When the times comes, you'll get the details. Something comes first—for your protection and mine. You won't be able to do this job right if you're wanted by the police, being hunted. For one thing, it's not on Earth. And you know—or should—how tough it is to get off Earth if the police are looking for you."

"Tough, but it can be done."

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"Still, an unnecessary risk. And anyway, I promised you your freedom as part of this deal. I meant your full freedom, not as a hunted man."

"And how do you expect to swing that?" Crag asked.

"With Evadne's help. She's a psyker technician."

Crag turned and looked at her again. It didn't make him like her any better, but it did surprise him. To be a psyker technician you had to have a degree in psychiatry and another in electronics. To look at Evadne you wouldn't think of degrees, unless they were degrees of your own temperature.

Olliver said, "Now don't get excited, Crag, when I tell you that I'm going to send you—with your consent—to the psyker. It'll be a short-circuited one, with Evadne running it; it won't have any effect on you at all. But Evadne will certify you as adjusted."

Crag frowned. "How do I know the machine will be shorted?"

"Why would we cross you up on it, Crag? It would defeat our own purpose. If you *were* adjusted, you wouldn't do this job for me—or want to."

Crag glanced at the woman. She said, "You can trust me, Crag, that far."

It was a funny way of putting it and, possibly for that reason, he believed her. It seemed worth the gamble. If they thought he'd been through the psyker, he really would be free. Free to go anywhere, do anything. And otherwise he'd be hunted the rest of his life; if he was ever picked up for the slightest slip he'd be identified at once and sent to the psyker as an escaped convict. And without a psyker technician to render it useless.

Olliver was saying, "It's the only way, Crag. By tomorrow noon you'll be a free man and can return here openly. I'll hire you—presumably to drive my atocar and my space cruiser—and keep you here un-

til it's time to do the little job for me. Which will be in about a week."

Crag decided quickly. He said, "It's a deal. Do I go out and give myself up?"

Olliver opened a drawer of the big desk and took out a needle gun. He said, "There's a better way. Safer, that is. You killed a guard, you know, and they might shoot instead of capturing you if you went out of here. I'll bring them in instead, and I'll have you already captured. You came here to kill me, and I captured you. They won't dare to shoot you then."

Crag nodded, and backed up against the wall, his hands raised.

Olliver said, "Go and bring them in, my dear," to Evadne.

Crag's eyes followed her as she went to the door. Then they returned to Olliver's. Olliver had raised the needle gun and his eyes locked with Crag's. He said softly, "Remember, Crag, she's my wife."

Crag grinned insolently at him. He said, "You don't seem very sure of that."

For a moment he thought he'd gone too far, as Olliver's knuckles tightened on the handle of the gun. Then the men were coming in to get him, and they held the tableau and neither spoke again.

He was back in jail, in the same cell, within half an hour. One thing happened that he hadn't counted on—although he would have realized it was inevitable if he'd thought of it. They beat him into insensibility before they left him there. Common sense—or self-preservation—made him wise enough not to raise his hand, his left hand, against them. He might have killed two or even three of them, but there were six, and the others would have killed him if he'd killed even one.

He came back to consciousness about midnight, and pain kept him from sleeping the rest of the night. At ten in the morning, six guards came and took him back to the same room in which he had been tried the day before. This time there



were no jury and no attorneys. Just Crag, six guards, and Judge Olliver.

Sentence to the psyker was a formality.

Six guards took him back to his cell. And, because it was the last chance they'd have, they beat him again. Not so badly this time; he'd have to be able to walk to the psyker.

At twelve they brought him lunch, but he wasn't able to eat it. At fourteen, they came and escorted him to the psyker room. They strapped him in the chair, slapped his face a bit and one of them gave him a farewell blow in the stomach that made him glad he hadn't eaten, and then they left.

A FEW minutes later, Evadne came in. Again she was dressed as she had been when he'd first seen her. But this time her beauty showed through even more for, after having seen her dressed as she'd been the evening before, he knew almost every curve that the tailored uniform tried to hide. She wore the horn-rimmed glasses when she came in, but took them off as soon as she had locked the door from inside. Probably, Crag thought, they were only protective coloration.

She stood in front of him, looking down at his face, a slight smile on her lips.

She said, "Quit looking so worried, Crag. I'm not going to psych you—and even your suspicious, unadjusted nature will admit I'd have no reason for lying about it now, if I intended to. I've got you where I'd want you, if I wanted you."

He said nothing.

Her smile faded. "You know, Crag, I'd hate to adjust you, even if this was a straight deal. You're a magnificent brute. I think I like you better the way you are, than if you were a mild-mannered clerk or elevator operator. That's what you'd be if I turned that thing on, you know."

"Why not unstrap me?"

"With the door locked, and with us

alone? Oh, I'm not being femininely modest, Crag. I know you hate women. I also know your temper, and I know how you've probably been treated since last night. I'd have to watch every word I said to keep you from slapping me down—left-handed."

"You know about that?"

"Olliver—Jon—knows a lot about you."

"Then he must know I wouldn't hit a woman—unless she got in my way."

"But I might." She laughed. "And you'd have to let me strap you in again anyway. And that reminds me. You're supposed to be unconscious when I leave this room. You'll have to fake that. The guards come in and unstrap you. They take you to a hospital room until you come around."

"Helping me do so with rubber hose?"

"No, that's all over with. You'll be a new man—not the man who killed a guard yesterday. They won't have any resentment against you."

"How long am I supposed to be unconscious?"

"Half an hour to an hour. And you may leave as soon thereafter as you wish. Better stay an hour or two; most of them do. You're supposed to be a bit dazed when you come to, and to orient yourself gradually. And don't forget you're not supposed to remember your own name, or any crimes you've ever committed—or anything you've ever done, for that matter."

"Just like amnesia, huh?"

"Exactly like amnesia—and, besides that, all the causes of maladjustments are supposed to be removed. You're supposed to love everyone in particular and humanity in general."

Crag laughed. "And does a halo come with it?"

"I'm not joking, Crag. Take that idea seriously—at least until you're safely away from here. Don't act as though you

still have a chip on your shoulder or they may suspect that something went wrong with the psycher—and send you back for another try. And I'll be off duty by then."

"If I don't remember who I am—I mean, if I'm supposed not to remember— isn't it going to be funny for me to walk out without being curious? Do they just let psyched guys walk out without a name?"

"Oh, no. Each one has a sponsor, someone who volunteers to help orient them to a new life. Jon has volunteered to be your sponsor and to give you a job. You'll be told that and given his address and cab fare to get there. He's supposed to explain things to you when you see him, to orient you."

"What if a guy would lam instead of going to his sponsor?"

"After the psycher, they're adjusted. They wouldn't. Remember, Crag, you've got to play it to the hilt until you're safe at our house. If anyone steps on your toe, apologize."

Crag growled, and then laughed. It was the first time he'd laughed—with humor—in a long time. But the idea of him apologizing to anyone for anything was so ridiculous he couldn't help it.

Evadne reached across his shoulder and did something; he couldn't tell what because his head was strapped against the back of the chair.

"Disconnected a terminal," she said. "I'll have to run the machine for a while; someone might notice that it isn't drawing any current."

She went to one side of the room and threw a switch. A low humming sound filled the room, but nothing happened otherwise. Crag relaxed.

She was standing in front of him again. She said, "You know, Crag, I'm almost tempted to give you a partial psyching—just to find out what made you what you are."

"Don't start anything you don't finish,"

he said grimly. Both his hands clenched.

"Oh, I know that. I know perfectly well that if I got any information from you under compulsion—as I could if I reconnected that terminal—I'd have to finish the job and adjust you or blank you out. Your ego wouldn't let me stay alive if I knew things about you that you'd told me involuntarily."

"You're smarter than I thought," he said.

"That isn't being smart, for a psychiatrist. Even a layman could guess that. But, Crag, you've got to tell me a few things."

"Why?"

"So I can turn in a report. I don't have to turn in a detailed one, but I must at least write up a summary. I could fake it easily, but it just might be checked and fail to tally with some things about you that are already known. You can see that."

"Well—yes."

"For instance, the loss of your hand. That was back before you turned criminal, so the facts about it will be on record somewhere. And I'd be supposed to ask you about that because it may have been a factor in your turning against society."

"I guess it was," Crag said. "And, as you say, it's on record so there's no reason I shouldn't tell you. It happened on the *Vega III*, when I'd been a spaceman eight years. It was a pure accident—not my fault or anyone else's. Just one of those things that happen. Mechanical failure in a rocket tube set it off while I was cleaning it.

"But they sprang a technicality on me and kept me from getting the fifty thousand credits compensation I was entitled to. Not only that, but took my license and rating away from me, turned me from a spaceman into a one-handed bum."

"What was the technicality?"

"Test for alcohol. I'd had exactly one drink—a stirrup cup, one small glass of

wine—six hours before, which was two hours before we left Mars. Orders are no drinks eight hours before blast-off, and I hadn't drunk anything for longer than that, except that one drink. And it had nothing to do with the accident—nobody feels one glass of wine six hours after. But they used it to save themselves what I had coming."

"And after that?"

"After that I got kicked around a while until I started in to do my share of the kicking."

"That wouldn't have been very long," she said. It wasn't a question and he didn't answer it.

She said, "I know what crimes they know you committed—without having been able to prove it. I'll say you confessed to them."

Crag shrugged. "Tell them what you like."

"Why do you hate women so much?"

"Is that personal curiosity? Or does it have to go in your report?"

She smiled. "As a matter of fact, both."

"I was married at the time I lost my job and my hand and my license. To a girl with hair like yours. Married only a few months and mad about her. Do I have to draw a diagram of what she did to me?"

She said soberly, "I can guess."

"You should be able to. You're more beautiful than she. And more evil."

Her face flamed and for a moment he thought she was going to strike him. But training told, and in seconds she was smiling again.

She said, "Not evil, Crag. Just ruthless, like you. I try to get what I want. But we're not psyching me, and it's time to end this now. Close your eyes and pretend to be unconscious."

He did. He heard her walk to the wall and throw the switch that shut off the machine. She came back and reconnected the terminal behind his shoulder, and still he kept his eyes closed.

He'd half-expected it, but it jarred him when it came. It was a kiss that should have wakened a statue, but—out-



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wardly—he took it with complete passiveness. He kept his own lips still.

And he hated her the more because the kiss brought to life in him things he'd thought were dead. And he knew that he'd hate her forever and probably kill her when he saw her again if, now, she laughed.

But she didn't laugh, or even speak. She left the room very quietly.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### New Life

**A** FEW minutes later the guards came. Only two of them this time; they weren't afraid of him now. They unstrapped him from the chair and carried him somewhere on a stretcher and rolled him off onto a bed.

When he was pretty sure that at least half an hour had gone by, he opened his eyes and looked around as though dazed. But the acting had been unnecessary; he was alone in a room. A few minutes later a nurse looked in and found him sitting up.

She came on into the room. "How are you feeling, sir?"

Crag shook his head. He said, "I *feel* all right, but I can't seem to remember anything. Who I am, or how I got here—wherever here is."

She smiled at him and sat down on the chair beside the bed. "You've just had—the equivalent of an attack of amnesia. That's all I'm supposed to tell you. But as soon as you feel equal to it, we'll send you to a man who will explain everything to you, and help you. Meanwhile, there's nothing for you to worry about. When you feel able to leave, come to the desk in the hall and I'll give you the address and money to get there."

Crag swung his feet off the bed. "I can go now," he said. But he made his voice sound uncertain.

"Please lie down and rest a while first. There's no hurry."

She went out, and Crag lay back down, obediently. He let another half hour pass and then went out into the corridor and to the desk. The nurse looked up at him and handed him a card and a ten-credit note. She said, "Please go to that address before you do anything else. Judge Olliver has a job for you and he will explain about your amnesia and tell you as much as it is necessary for you to know about your past."

He thanked her and went out, alert to watch his temper if any incident were staged to test him. But none was, although he was, he felt sure, watched to see whether he headed immediately for the atocab stand just outside the building and gave the address he'd been handed on the card—an address he already knew but pretended to read off the card to the cabbie.

Twenty minutes later he walked up to the guard at Olliver's front door and asked if he might see the Judge.

"Your name Crag?"

He almost said yes before he thought. "Sounds silly," he said, "but I don't know my name. I was sent here to find out."

The guard nodded and let him in. "He's waiting for you," he said. "Second door down the hall."

Crag entered the small room in which he'd talked to Olliver and Evadne the evening before. Only Olliver was there now, at the desk.

"Everything go all right?" he asked.

Crag threw himself into a chair. "Perfect," he said, "except for two beatings-up that weren't on the menu."

"You should feel it's worth that to be free, Crag. And now—you're still interested in earning that million?"

"Yes. But the price has gone up."

Olliver frowned at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean besides that I want you to do a spot of research downtown and get

me twelve names, and addresses for each. The six guards who put me in a cell last night and the six—they were different ones—who put me back in the cell after the trial this morning.”

Olliver stared at him a moment and then laughed. He said, “All right, but not till after the job is over. Then if you’re fool enough to want to look them up, it’s your business, not mine.”

“Which gets us to the job. Where is it, what is it, how long will it take.”

“It’s on Mars. We’re going there in four days; I can’t get away any sooner than that. I told you what it is—a job of burglary, but not a simple one. How long it takes depends on you; I imagine you’ll need some preparation, but if you can’t do it in a few weeks, you can’t do it at all.”

“Fair enough,” Crag said. “But if I’ve got that long to wait, how about an advance?”

“Again on a condition, Crag. I don’t want you to get into any trouble before you’ve done the job. I want you to stay here. You can send out for anything you want.”

Crag’s short nod got him a thousand credits.

He needed sleep, having got none the night before because of pain from the first, and worst, beating. And every muscle in his body still ached.

But before he even tried to sleep he sent out for Martian *scot*, and drank himself into insensibility.

**H** E SLEPT, then, until late afternoon of the next day. When he woke, he drank the rest of the liquor and then went downstairs, not quite steady on his feet and with his eyes blood-shot and bleary. But under control, mentally.

And it was probably well that he was, for in the downstairs hallway, he encountered Evadne for the first time since

his return to Olliver’s. She glanced at him and took in his condition, then passed him without speaking and with a look of cold contempt that—well, if he *hadn’t* been under control mentally—

The next day he was sober, and stayed that way. He told himself he hated Evadne too much to let her see him otherwise. And after that he spent most of his time reading. He had breakfast and lunch alone, but ate dinner with Olliver and Evadne, and spent part of the evening with them.

He didn’t mention the job again; it was up to Olliver, he thought, to bring that up. And Olliver did, on the evening of the third day.

He said, “We’re going to Mars tomorrow, Crag. Forgot to ask you one thing. Can you pilot a Class AB space cruiser, or do I hire us a pilot?”

“I can handle one.”

“You’re sure? It’s space-warp drive, you know. As I understand it, the last ship you worked on was rocket.”

Crag said, “The last ship I flew legally was rocket. But how about a license, unless you want to land in a back alley on Mars?”

“You’re licensed. If a license is invalidated for any reason other than incompetency, it’s automatically renewed if you’ve been readjusted through the psycher. And today I picked up a stat of your license and a copy of the psycher certificate. After I got them, though, I remembered I didn’t know whether you could handle space-warp.”

Evadne said, “It doesn’t matter, Jon. I’m licensed; I can handle the cruiser.”

“I know, my dear. But I’ve told you; I do not think it safe to travel in space with only one person who is qualified to pilot the ship. Perhaps I’m ultra-conservative, but why take unnecessary risks?”

Crag asked, “Ready now to tell me about the job?”



"Yes. When we reach Mars, we'll separate. Evadne and I will stay in Marsport until you have—accomplished your mission."

"Which is to be done where?"

"You've heard of Kurt Eisen?"

"The one who helped develop space-warp?"

"That's the one. He has his laboratory and home just outside Marsport. He's fabulously wealthy; it's a tremendous estate. About eighty employes, thirty of them armed guards. The place is like a fortress. It'll almost have to be an inside job—another good reason why you couldn't have handled it without a psyker certificate."

Crag nodded. "At least it will be easier if I can get in. And just what am I looking for after I get there?"

"A device that looks like a flat pocket flashlight. Blued steel case. Lens in the center of one end, just like an atomic flashlight, but the lens is green and opaque—opaque to light, that is."

"You've seen it?"

"No. The party's source of information is a technician who used to work for Eisen. He's now a member of the party. He worked with Eisen in developing it, but can't make one by himself; he wasn't fully in Eisen's confidence—just allowed to help with details of design. Oh, and if you can get the plans, it'll help. We can duplicate the original, but it'll be easier from the plans. And one other thing. Don't try it out."

"All right," Crag said, "I won't try it out—on one condition. That you tell me what it is and what it does. Otherwise, my curiosity might get the better of me."

Olliver frowned, but he answered. "It's a disintegrator. It's designed to negate the—well, I'm not up on atomic theory, so I can't give it to you technically. But it negates the force that holds the electrons to the nucleus. In effect, it collapses matter into neutronium."

Crag whistled softly. "And you say it's an ineffective weapon?"

"Yes, because its range is so short. The size needed increases as the cube of the cube of the distance—or something astronomical like that. The one you're after works up to three feet. To make one that would work at a hundred feet it would have to be bigger than a house. And for a thousand feet—well, there aren't enough of the necessary raw materials in the Solar System to build one; it would have to be the size of a small planet. And besides, there's a time lag. The ray from the disintegrator sets up a chain reaction in any reasonably homogeneous object it's aimed at, but it takes seconds to get it started. So if you shoot at somebody—at a few feet distance—they're dead all right, but they've got time to kill you before they find it out." Olliver smiled. "Your left hand is much more effective, Crag, and has about the same range."

"Then why is it worth a million credits to you?"

"I told you, the by-product. Neutronium."

Crag had heard of neutronium; every spaceman knew that some of the stars were made of almost completely collapsed matter weighting a dozen tons to the cubic inch. Dwarf stars, the size of Earth and the weight of the sun. But no such collapsed matter existed in the Solar System. Not that there was any reason why it shouldn't—if a method had been found to make atoms pack themselves solidly together. Pure neutronium would be unbelievably heavy, heavier than the center of any known star.

"Neutronium," he said, thoughtfully. "But what would you use it for? How could you handle it? Wouldn't it sink through anything you tried to hold it in and come to rest at the center of the earth—or whatever planet you made it on?"

"You're smart, Crag. It would. You

couldn't use it for weighting chessmen. I know how to capitalize on it—but that's one thing I don't think you have to know. Although I may tell you later, after you've turned over the disintegrator."

Crag shrugged. It wasn't his business, after all. A million credits was enough for him, and let Olliver and his party capitalize on neutronium however they wished. He asked, "Did this technician who worked for Eisen give you a diagram of the place?"

Olliver opened a drawer of the desk and handed Crag an envelope.

Crag spent the rest of the evening studying its contents.

**T**HEY took off from Albuquerque spaceport the following afternoon and landed on Mars a few hours later. As soon as the cruiser was hangared, they separated, Crag presumably quitting his job with Olliver. He promised to report in not more than two weeks.

A man named Lane Knutson was his first objective. He had full details about Knutson and an excellent description of him; that had been an important part of the contents of the envelope he had studied the final evening on Earth. Knutson was the head guard at Eisen's place

and did the hiring of the other guards. According to Crag's information, he hung out, in his off hours, in spacemen's dives in the tough section of Marsport.

Crag hung out there, too, but spent his time circulating from place to place instead of settling down in any one. He found Knutson on the third day. He couldn't have missed him, from the description. Knutson was six feet six and weighed two hundred ninety. He had arms like an ape and the strength and disposition of a Venusian *draatr*.

Crag might have made friends with him in the normal manner, but he took a short cut by picking a quarrel. With Knutson's temper, the distance between a quarrel and a fight was about the same as the distance between adjacent grapes under pressure in a wine press.

Crag let himself get the worst of it for a minute or two, so Knutson wouldn't feel too bad about it, and then used his left hand twice, very lightly, pulling his punches. Once in the guts to bend the big man over, and then a light flick to the side of the jaw, careful not to break bone. Knutson was out cold for five minutes.

After that, they had a drink together and got chummy. Within half an hour Crag had admitted that he was looking

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for a job—and was promptly offered one.

He reported for work the following day and, after Knutson had shown him around, he was glad he hadn't decided to try the outside. The place really was a fortress. A twenty-foot-high electronic barrier around the outside; inside that, worse things. But it didn't matter, since he was already inside. Even so, he had to undergo a strenuous physical and verbal examination and Olliver had been right about the psycher certificate; without it, he'd have been out on his ear within an hour.

He spent the next five days learning all the ropes. He knew where the big safe was—in the laboratory. But he wanted to learn the position of every guard and every alarm between the room in which he slept and the laboratory itself. Fortunately, he was given a day shift.

On the fifth night he made his way to the laboratory and found himself facing the blank sheet of durasteel that was the door of the safe. All his information about that safe was that the lock was magnetic and that there were two alarms.

He'd brought nothing with him—all employees were searched on their way in as well as on their way out—but all the materials he needed to make anything he wanted were there at hand in the laboratory. He made himself a detector and traced two pairs of wires through the walls from the safe into adjacent rooms and found the two alarms—both hidden inside air ducts—to which they were connected. He disconnected both alarms and then went back to the safe. On Eisen's desk near it, he'd noticed a little horseshoe magnet—a toy—that was apparently used as a paperweight. He got the hunch (which saved him much time) that, held in the proper position against that sheet of steel—six by six feet square—it would open the door.

And, unless it was exactly at one corner, there'd have to be a mark on the door to

show where the magnet was to be held. The durasteel door made it easy for him; there weren't any accidental marks or scratches on it to confuse him. Only an almost imperceptible fly-speck about a foot to the right of the center. But fly-specks scrape off and this mark didn't—besides, there are no flies on Mars.

He tried the magnet in various positions about the speck and when he tried holding it with both poles pointing upward and the speck exactly between them, the door swung open.

The safe—it was a vault, really, almost six feet square and ten or twelve feet deep—contained so many things that it was almost harder to find what he was looking for than it had been to open the safe. But he found it. Luckily, there was a tag attached to it with a key number which made it easy to find the plans for the disintegrator in the file drawers at the back of the safe.

He took both disintegrator and plans to the workbenches of the laboratory. Eisen couldn't possibly have provided better equipment for a burglar who wished to leave a possible duplicate of whatever object he wanted to steal. And he'd even provided a perfectly sound-proofed laboratory so even the noisier of the power-tools could be used safely. Within an hour, Crag had made what, outwardly, was a reasonably exact duplicate of the flashlight-sized object he was stealing. It didn't have any insides in it, and it wouldn't have disintegrated anything except the temper of a man who tried to use it, but it looked good. He put the tag from the real one on it and replaced it in the proper drawer in the safe.

He spent a little longer than that forging a duplicate of the plans. Not *quite* a duplicate; he purposely varied a few things so that no one except Eisen himself could make a successful disintegrator from them.

He spent another hour removing every

trace of his visit. He reconnected the alarms, removed every trace—except a minute shortage of stock—of his work in the laboratory, made sure that every tool was restored to place, and put back the toy magnet on the exact spot and at the exact angle on Eisen's desk that it had been before.

When he left the laboratory there was nothing to indicate that he had been there—unless Eisen should ever again decide to try out his disintegrator. And since he had tried it once and presumably discarded it as practically useless, that didn't seem likely.

There remained only the obstacle of getting it out of the grounds, and that was simple. One large upstairs room was a museum which held Eisen's collection of artifacts of the Martian aborigines. Crag had seen several primitive bows and quivers of arrows. He wrapped and fastened the plans around the shaft of a long, strong arrow and securely tied the disintegrator to its crude metal head. He went on up to the roof and shot the arrow high into the air over the electronic barrier and the strip of cleared ground outside it, into the thick jungle beyond.

It was almost dawn. He went back to his room and got two hours of needed sleep. The hard part was over. The little capsule he'd brought with him would take care of the rest of it.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Glory Hunters

HE TOOK the capsule as soon as the alarm buzzer awakened him, half an hour before he was to report for duty. It was the one thing he'd smuggled in with him, perfectly hidden in a box of apparently identical capsules containing neobenzedrine, the standard preventive of Martian amoebic fever. All Earthmen on Mars took neobenzedrine.

One of the capsules in Crag's box, though, contained a powder of similar color but of almost opposite effect. It wouldn't give him amoebic fever, but it would produce perfectly counterfeited symptoms.

He could, of course, simply have quit, but that might just possibly have aroused suspicion; it might have led to a thorough check-up of the laboratory and the contents of the safe. And he couldn't suddenly become disobedient in order to get himself fired. Psyched men didn't act that way.

The capsule took care of it perfectly. He started to get sick at his stomach. Knutson came by and found Crag retching out a window. As soon as Crag pulled his head back in, Knutson took a look at Crag's eyes; the pupils were contracted almost to pinpoints. He touched Crag's forehead and found it hot. And Crag admitted, when asked, that he'd probably forgotten to take his neobenzedrine for a few days.

That was that. There's no known cure for Martin amoebic fever except to get away from Mars at the first opportunity. He neither quit nor was fired. Knutson took him to the office and got his pay for him and then asked him whether he could make it back to Marsport by himself or if he wanted help. Crag said he could make it.

The search of his person and effects was perfunctory; he could probably have smuggled the tiny gadget and the single piece of paper out in his luggage. But the arrow had been safer.

Outside, as soon as jungle screened him from view, he took another capsule, one that looked just like the first but that counteracted it. He waited until the worst of the nausea from the first capsule had passed and then hid his luggage while he hunted for the arrow and found it.

Olliver had told him not to try it, but he tried it anyway. It wasn't exactly that

he didn't trust Olliver—after all, if he got paid off, and he'd make sure of that, nothing else mattered—it was just that he was curious whether Olliver had told him the truth about the disintegrator's limitations.

He waited until he'd put a little more distance between himself and Eisen's place and then aimed the gadget at a bush and tripped the thumb catch. He held it about four feet from the bush the first time and nothing happened. He moved it to about two feet from the bush and tripped the catch again. He thought for a while that nothing was going to happen, but after a few seconds the bush took on a misty look, and then, quite abruptly, it wasn't there any more.

Olliver had told the truth, then. The thing had an effective range of only about three feet, and there was a definite time lag.

The rest of the way into Marsport—afoot as far as the edge of town and by atocab the rest of the way—he tried to figure out what Olliver's use for neutronium might be. He couldn't. In the first place he couldn't see how Olliver could *get* the collapsed matter, the tons-to-a-square-inch stuff, once he'd disintegrated objects into it. The bush he'd tried it on hadn't seemed to collapse inward on itself; it had simply disintegrated all at once and the dead atoms of it had probably fallen through the crust of Mars as easily as rain falls through air.

He still hadn't figured an answer when he reached the swanky Marsport hotel where Olliver and Evadne were staying.

He had himself announced from the desk and then went up to Olliver's suite. Olliver, his face both eager and tense, let him in. He didn't ask the question, but Crag nodded.

Evadne, he saw as he walked past Olliver, was there. She was sitting on the sofa looking at him, her eyes enigmatic. Crag tried not to look at her. It was dif-

ficult. She was dressed even more revealingly than she had been dressed the first night he had seen her at Olliver's house in Albuquerque, back on Earth. And she looked even more beautiful.

Crag decided he wanted to get away from there, quick. He took the disintegrator and the folded plans from his pocket and put them on the table.

Olliver picked them up with unconcealed eagerness.

Crag said, "One million credits. Then we're through."

Olliver put gadget and paper in one pocket and took out a wallet from another. He said drily, "I don't carry a million in ready change, Crag. The bulk of it is back on Earth; I'll have to give it to you there. But so you won't worry or think I'm stalling, I did bring two hundred thousand credits with me. Eight hundred thousand's waiting for you back home."

Crag nodded curtly, and took the offered money. He counted it roughly and put it in his pocket. It was more money than he'd ever had or hoped to have in one chunk. He was set for life, even if he never got the rest.

He asked, "At your home? Shall I look you up there?"

Olliver looked surprised. "Why not come back with us? We're leaving at once, now that I have this. As soon as we can get clearance. We're making one brief stopover—going one other place first, that is—but we'll be home within hours. You may have to wait days to get public transport, and you know all the red tape you'll have to go through."

It made sense, but Crag hesitated.

Olliver laughed. "Afraid of me, Crag? Afraid I'm going to disintegrate you en route? To get my money back?" He laughed harder; there was almost hysterical amusement in the laughter. Obviously the gadget Crag had stolen for him excited him immensely. "You needn't worry, Crag. With this—" He slapped his



pocket. "—a million credits is peanuts to me."

From the sofa, Evadne's voice said with languid amusement, "He isn't afraid of you, Jon. He's afraid of me."

Crag didn't look at her. He was watching Olliver's face and he saw amusement change to jealousy and anger.

Crag hadn't been afraid of Olliver. It had occurred to him only as a remote possibility that Olliver might try to kill him. Now, from the look on Olliver's face, his trying to kill Crag looked like a fair bet. Not, though, to get his money back.

Crag said, "All right, Olliver. I might as well go with you."

Deliberately he turned away from possible danger to lock glances with Evadne.

She was smiling at him.

**T**HEY got to the spaceport within an hour and through the formalities of clearance before noon.

Crag didn't ask, "Well, where?" until he was in the pilot's seat of the little cruiser.

"Asteroid belt," Olliver told him.

"Where in the belt? What asteroid?"

"Doesn't matter. Any one big enough to land on."

Crag had lifted the computation shelf, ready to calculate distance and direction. He folded the shelf back; a jump of a

hundred million miles, straight out from the sun, would put him in the middle of the belt. He set the controls, made the jump, and put the ship back on manual control. His detectors would show the presence of any of the asteroids within ten million miles. They showed the presence of several right now.

He turned to Olliver. He said, "We're near Ceres. Four hundred eighty mile diameter. That one do?"

"Too big, Crag. It'd take days. Pick the smallest one you can land on."

Crag nodded and studied the other asteroids showing on the detector and picked the smallest of them. It wasn't much bigger than a fair-sized house but he could land on it. He did. Rather, he killed the inertia of the spaceship after pulling alongside the tiny asteroid and matching his speed to its. Ship and asteroid bumped together, held by not much more than a pound of gravitational pull between them. Had the asteroid had an atmosphere, the ship would have floated in it, so slight was the attraction.

Olliver clapped him on the shoulder. "Nice work, Crag. Want to put on a spacesuit and come out to watch the fun?"

Crag locked the controls. "Why not?"

He saw now what Olliver intended to do—try out the disintegrator on the asteroid. And he saw now how Olliver could get neutronium. Disintegrating an asteroid was different from disintegrating

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an object on the crust of a planet. Instead of falling through the crust, the asteroid would collapse within itself, into a tiny, compact ball of neutronium. Maybe the size of an apple or an orange. It could be loaded—

He stopped suddenly, half in and half out of the spacesuit he had started to pull on. He said, "Olliver, you can't take it back with you. Sure, we can put it in the spaceship, but when we get back to Earth we can't land with it. Near Earth, it's going to weigh ten times—maybe twenty times—as much as the ship itself. It'll either tear a hole through the hull or crash us, one or the other."

Olliver laughed. He was picking up a thermoglass helmet but hadn't put it on yet. He said, "This is just a tryout, Crag. We're not taking any neutronium back with us."

Crag finished putting on the spacesuit. Olliver had his helmet on, and Evadne was adjusting hers. He couldn't talk to either of them, now, until he had his own helmet on. Then the suit-radios would take care of communication.

He saw now how neutronium could be obtained, all right. There were rocks a lot smaller than this one whizzing around the belt, ones that weighed only a few tons, that a spaceship could handle easily and transport back to Earth after they'd been converted into collapsed matter.

He didn't see, as yet, what practical use neutronium could have that would make it as immensely valuable as Olliver seemed to think it would be. But that wasn't his business.

He got his helmet on, and nodded that he was ready. Evadne was standing by the air controls and she pulled a switch when he nodded. A space cruiser as small as Olliver's never had an airlock; it was simpler, if one wished to leave it in space or on an airless body; to exhaust the air from the entire ship and let the airmaker rebuild an atmosphere after one returned

to the ship—and before removing one's spacesuit.

Now, in the earphones of his helmet, he heard Olliver's voice say, "Come on. Hurry up." Olliver opened the door and the last-of the air whished out. But then, before stepping out, Olliver went back past Crag to the controls. He turned the lock on them and put the small but quite complicated key into one of the capacious pockets of his spacesuit. The plans for the disintegrator, Crag knew, were in the innermost pocket of his jumper.

Crag wondered which one of them he distrusted, or if it was both. Not that it mattered.

Crag shrugged and stepped out onto the tiny asteroid. Evadne followed him, and then Olliver.

He heard Olliver take a deep breath and say, "Here goes."

Olliver was pointing the little disintegrator down at the rocky surface of the asteroid, bending over so it was only a foot from the rock. Crag couldn't hear the click, but he saw Olliver's thumb move the catch.

Crag asked, "How long will it take?"

"For something this size? I'd guess half an hour to an hour. But we won't have to wait till it's completely collapsed. When it's gone down enough that I'm sure—"

Crag looked about him, at the spaceship behind them, bumping gently against the surface of the asteroid, right at the shadow line that divided night and day. Strange that a world only twenty or thirty yards in diameter should have night and day—and yet darkness on the night side would be even denser than the darkness on the night side of Earth.

*Time, Crag thought, and its relation to distance are strange on a world like this.* If he walked twenty paces ahead and put himself right under distant, tiny Sol, it would be high noon. Thirty or forty more steps—held down to the light asteroid only

by the gravplates on the shoes of the spacesuit—and he'd be in the middle of the night side; it would be midnight.

He chuckled at the fancy. "It's a small world," he said, remembering that Olliver had said that to him in the conversation between judge and prisoner at the end of the trial, the conversation that had led to all of this.

Olliver laughed excitedly, almost hysterically. "And it's getting smaller already—I think. Don't you, Crag, Evadne?"

Crag looked about him and tried to judge, but if there'd been any shrinkage as yet, he couldn't tell. He heard Evadne say, "I'm not sure yet, Jon."

Olliver said, "We can be sure in a few seconds. I've got a rule." He took a steel foot rule from one of the pockets of his spacesuit and laid it down on a flat expanse of rock. He picked up a loose bit of rock and made a scratch opposite each end of the rule.

Evadne walked over near Crag. Her eyes, through the plastic of the helmet, looked into his intensely, searchingly. He got the idea that she wanted to ask him a question and didn't dare—because Olliver would have heard it too—but was trying to find the answer by looking at him and reading his face. He met her gaze squarely, trying to guess what she was thinking or wondering. It hadn't anything to do, he felt sure just then, with the fact that he was a man and she a woman. It was something more important than that.

He heard Olliver's voice say, "*I think so. I think it's—Wait, let's be sure.*"

He turned away from Evadne and watched Olliver as Olliver watched the rule and the scratches on the rock. There was tension among them, but no one spoke. A minute or two went by, and then Olliver stood up and faced them.

His eyes were shining—almost as though with madness—but his voice was

calm now. He said, "It works." He looked from one to the other of them and then his eyes stopped on Crag. He said, "Crag, your million credits is waste paper. How would you like to be second in command of the Solar System?"

For the first time, Crag wondered if Olliver were mad.

The thought must have showed in his face, for Olliver shook his head. "I'm not crazy, Crag. Nor do I know any commercial use for neutronium. That was camouflage. Listen, Crag—*A few of these little gadgets set up in hidden places on each of the occupied planets, set up with radio controls so they can be triggered off from wherever I may be—that's all it will take.* If this works on an asteroid—and it has—it'll work on an object of any size. A chain reaction doesn't care whether it works in a peanut or a planet."

Crag said slowly, "You mean—"

"You might as well know all of it, Crag. There isn't any political party behind this. That was just talk. The only way peace can be kept in the system is by the rule of *one man*. But I'll need help, Crag, and you're the man I'd rather have, in spite of—" His voice changed. "Evadne, that's useless."

C RAG looked quickly toward the woman and saw that she'd pulled a heater from the pocket of her spacesuit and was aiming it at Olliver. Olliver laughed. He said, "I thought it was about time for you to show your colors, my dear. I expected that, really. I took the charge out of that heater."

Evadne pulled the trigger and nothing happened. Crag saw her face go pale—but it seemed anger rather than fear.

She said, "All right, you beat me on that one, Jon. But someone will stop you, somehow. Do you realize that you couldn't do what you plan without destroying a planet or two—billions of lives, Jon—and that Earth itself would have to be one of

the ones you destroyed? Because Earth is the—the fightingest one and wouldn't knuckle under to you, even on a threat like that? Jon, you'd kill off more than half of the human race, just to rule the ones who are left!"

She didn't drop the useless heater, but it hung at her side.

Olliver had one in his own hand now. He said, "Take it away from her, Crag."

Crag looked from one of them to the other. And he looked around him. The asteroid *was* shrinking. There was now a definite diminution in diameter, perhaps by a tenth.

Olliver spoke again and more sharply. "Take it away from her, Crag."

Olliver's blaster covered both of them. He could have killed Evadne where she stood; the command was meaningless, and Crag knew it was a test. Olliver was making him line up, one way or the other.

Crag thought of Earth, that he hated. And he thought of it as a dead little ball of heavy matter—and he didn't hate it that much. But to be second in command—not of a world, but of *worlds*—

Olliver said, "Your last chance, Crag. And listen—don't think I'm blind to you and Evadne. But I didn't care. She's been spying on me all along. I know the outfit she belongs to—a quixotic group that's trying to end system-wide corruption another way, a way that won't work. She's a spy, Crag, and I don't want her.

"Here are my final terms and you've got a few seconds to decide. Disarm her now, and I won't kill her. We'll take her back, and you can have her if you're silly enough to want her—out of billions of women who'll be yours for the taking."

Maybe that was all it took. Crag decided.

He reached for Evadne with his good hand, seeing the look of cold contempt in her eyes—and the puzzlement in her eyes as he swung her around instead of reach-

ing for the useless gun she held. He said quickly, "*Night side!*" He propelled her forward ahead of him and then ran after her. He hoped Olliver's reflexes would be slow. They *had* to be.

On a tiny and shrinking asteroid, the horizon isn't far. It was a few steps on this one, and they were over it in less than a second. He heard Olliver curse and felt a wave of heat go past him, just too late. And then they were in the darkness.

He found Evadne by running into her and grabbed her and held on because there wasn't going to be much time. In seconds, Olliver would realize that he didn't have to come after them, that all he had to do was to get into the ship and warp off—or even just close the door and sit it out until they were dead. Even though Olliver wasn't a qualified pilot he could, with the help of the manual of instructions inside the ship, have a fair chance of getting it back to Earth or Mars.

So Crag said quickly, "I can stop him. But it's curtains for both of us, too. Shall I?"

She caught her breath, but there wasn't any hesitation in her answer. "Hurry, Crag. Hurry."

He ran on around the night side—ten steps—to the ship. He braced his feet as he lifted it and then threw it out into space—the whole pound weight of it. It seemed to go slowly, but it kept going. It would keep going for a long time, from that throw. It might come back, eventually, but not for hours—and the air in spacesuits of this type was good for only half an hour or so without processing or renewal.

Olliver would never rule a system now, only the tiniest world.

But all three of them were dead. He heard Olliver scream madly with rage and saw him come running over the horizon for a shot at him. Crag laughed and ducked back into blackness. He ran into Evadne, who had followed him. He caught

her quickly as he crashed into her. He said, "Give me the heater, quick," and took it from her hand.

He could see Olliver standing there, heater in hand, just where the spaceship had been, peering into the darkness, trying to see where to shoot them. But he could see Olliver and Olliver, on the day side, couldn't see him.

He'd rather have had his metal hand to row—he was used to using that and could hit a man's head at twenty or thirty feet. But the heater-gun would serve now; Olliver wasn't even ten feet away and he couldn't miss.

He didn't miss. The missile shattered Olliver's helmet.

Crag walked forward into the light, keeping between Evadne and Olliver so she wouldn't have to see. A man whose helmet has been shattered in space isn't a pleasant sight.

He reached down and got the disin-

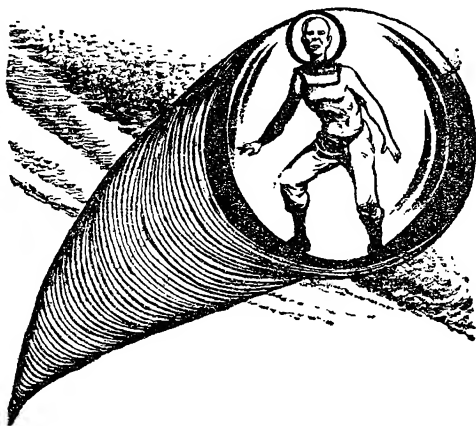
tegrator out of Olliver's pocket. He used it.

Evadne came up and took his arm as he stood there, looking upward, seeing a distant gleam of sunlight on an object that was still moving away from them. He wished now he hadn't thrown the spaceship so hard; had he tossed it lightly it might conceivably have returned before the air in his and Evadne's spacesuits ran out. But he couldn't have been sure he could get Olliver before Olliver, who had a loaded heater, could get him. And when the asteroid got small enough, the night side would no longer have been a protection. You can hide on the night side of a world—but not when it gets as small as a basketball.

Evadne said, "Thanks, Crag. You were— Is *wonderful* too hackneyed a word?"

Crag grinned at her. He said, "It's a wonderful word."

## OPINIONS, PLEASE



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He put his arms around her.

And then laughed. Here he was with two hundred thousand credits—a fortune—in his pocket and the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. And her arms were around him too and—you can't even kiss a woman in a spacesuit! Any more than you can spend a fortune on an asteroid without even a single tavern on it.

An asteroid that was now less than ten yards in diameter.

Evadne laughed too, and he was glad, very glad of that. It *was* funny—if you saw it that way—and it made things easier in this last moment that she could see it that way too.

He saw she was breathing with difficulty. She said, "Crag—my dear—this suit must not have had its tank fully charged with oxygen. I'm afraid I can't—stay with you much longer."

He held her tighter. He couldn't think of anything to say.

She said, "But we stopped him, Crag. Someday humanity will get itself out of the mess it's in now. And when it does, there'll still—be an Earth—for it to live on."

"Was he right, Evadne? I mean, about your being a member of some secret organization?"

"No. He either made that up or imagined it. I was—just his wife, Crag. But I'd stopped loving him months ago. I knew, though, he planned to buy or steal that gadget of Eisen's—he'd have got it somehow, even if we hadn't helped him. And I suspected, but didn't know, that he was planning something—bad. I stayed with him so I'd have a chance to try to stop him if—I was right."

She was breathing harder. Her arms tightened around him. She said, "Crag, I want that—gadget. I'll use it on myself; I won't ask you to. But it will be sudden and painless, not—like this." She was fighting for every breath now, but she

laughed again. "Guess I'm lying, Crag. I'm not afraid to die either way. But I've—seen people who died—*this* way and they're—well—I don't want you to see me—like that. I'd—rather—"

He pressed it into her hand. He tightened his arms one last time and then stepped quickly back because he could hear and see how much pain she was in now, how every breath was becoming agony for her. He looked away, as he knew she wanted him to.

And when he looked back, after a little while, there was nothing there to see; nothing at all.

Except the disintegrator itself, lying there on a sphere now only six feet across. He picked it up. There was still one thing to do. Someone, sometime, might find this collapsed asteroid, attracted to it by the fact that his detector showed a mass greater than the bulk shown in a visiplat. If he found the gadget clinging there beside it—

He was tempted to use it instead, to take the quicker way instead of the slower, more painful one. But he took it apart, throwing each tiny piece as far out into space as he could. Maybe some of them would form orbits out there and maybe others would fall back. But no one would ever gather *all* the pieces and manage to put them together again.

He finished, and the world he lived on was less than a yard in diameter now and it was still shrinking. He disconnected his gravplates because there wasn't any use trying to stand on it. But it was as heavy as it had ever been; there was still enough gravitational pull to keep him bumping gently against it. Of course he could push himself away from it now and go sailing off into space. But he didn't. Somehow, it was companionship.

A small world, he thought, and getting smaller.

The size of an orange now. He laughed as he put it into his pocket.

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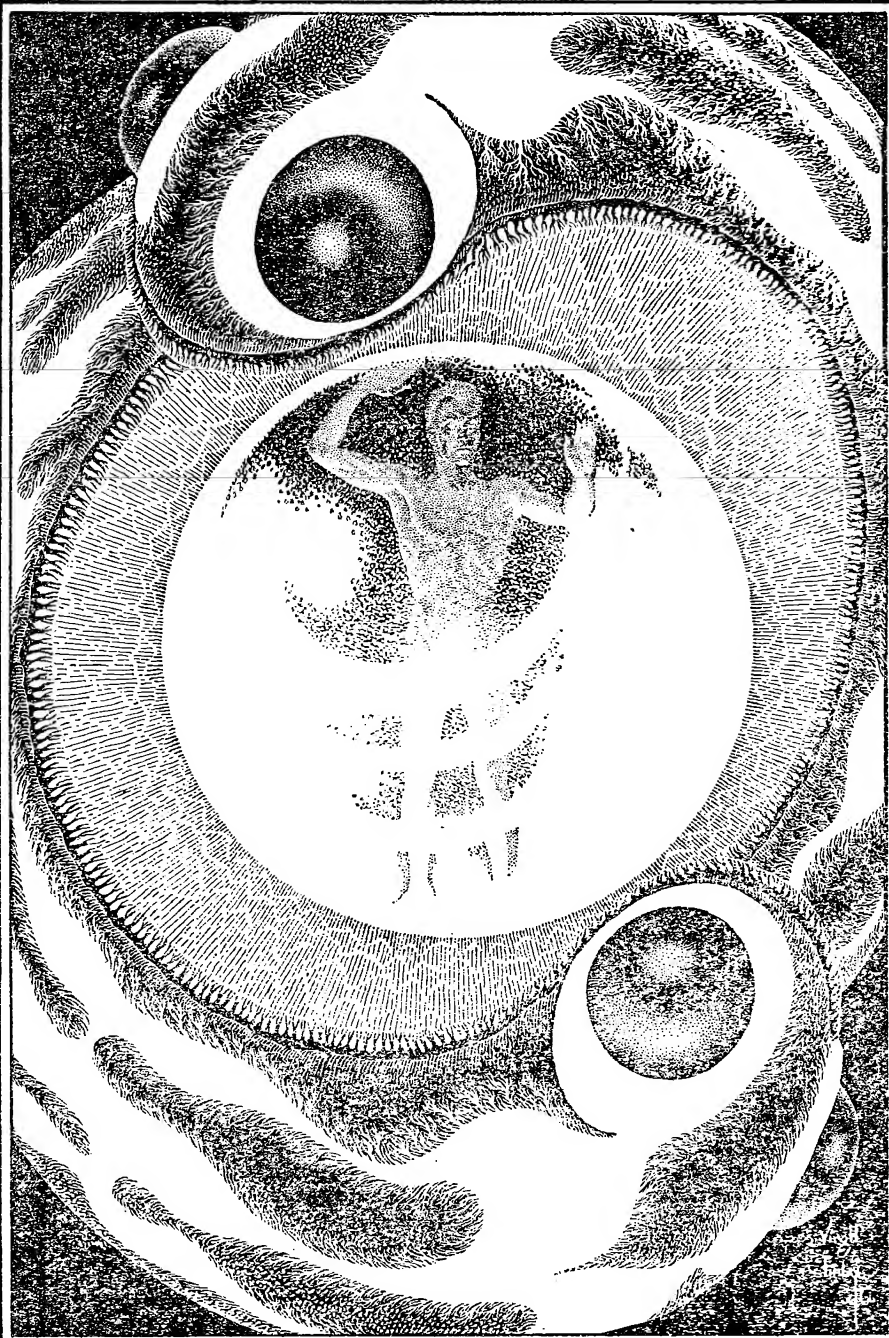
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Deep-cradled were the first faint stirrings of life;  
fluted and fragile, like a sighing cocoon 'caught  
in a gust of luminous wind.



*He never knew what mystery of time and space had set aside his death, entered him once more on the roster of the living . . . but it hardly mattered, for in either era he had the same mission to perform. Holden, you see, was—*



By FRANK  
BELKNAP LONG



# The Timeless Man

**"M**AN, YOU must be insane!  
To paint *now*—"

The clicking of the Geiger counters almost drowned out the voice. Holden did not turn. He was spreading pigments on a canvas which stood half in shadows, half in flickering light, a strange kind of exaltation swelling within him.

Roger Holden did not want to die. To the artist life is almost unendurably sweet, and Holden was no stranger to fear. But when he painted, his work absorbed him to the exclusion of all else.

It had always embarrassed him, however, to paint in another's presence. Suddenly he found himself resenting Langley's presence, without ceasing to feel grateful to him.

He swung about with a gesture of reproach. "You promised me a few days' grace," he said. "If you didn't want me to paint, why did you invite me to bring my easel and brushes along?"

"You had to have something to occupy your mind." Langley laughed harshly. "Any game would do. We could have

sat here playing chess. But when Death does the checkmating chess isn't a very amusing game."

"This isn't a game," Holden said impatiently. "Or a gesture of bravado, either. You're amazed because I can still paint—is that it?"

Langley was a powerful giant, dark-haired and dark-eyed, with a nervous strength in his fingers that made it easy for him to break things. He twisted his own wrist as he returned Holden's stare, as though snapping it would have been less intolerable to him than trying to frame an answer.

"Not amazed exactly," he said slowly. "Under stress, human nature is unpredictable. But somehow—I expected logical behavior from you at five to twelve."

"But my behavior is logical," Holden said. "You know the old saying— Life is short but art is long, or, if you prefer, eternal. It may be a thumping platitude, but I happen to believe it."

"But no one will see your painting," Langley protested. "No human eye will

ever look on it again. When your brain dies it will become a meaningless jumble of pigments!"

"It will still be eternal," Holden insisted. "You're confusing duration with eternity. Eternity is timelessness—it's the antithesis of duration. If I paint a masterpiece I'm creating something that will live forever—in the one deathless moment of its creation."

Langley shook his head, a tortured skepticism in his gaze. "That's sophistry, Roger."

Holden turned slowly, as though he were balancing an invisible burden of sorrow on his shoulders, and picked up his palette. He began to paint again.

"Lord Dunsany once wrote a little fantasy to summarize the futility of all human effort," Langley pursued. "He compared humanity to a man falling from a high building, plunging to certain destruction and yet reaching out with a piece of chalk to scrawl something imperishable on the face of the building." Langley's lips twisted in a sardonic smile. "He didn't succeed."

"He tried," Holden retorted. "The effort wasn't futile. It was the man's glory—the one thing that set him apart from the brutes."

Holden seemed oblivious to the clicking of the Geigers, only half attentive to his conversation with Langley. His eyes shone as he bent toward the canvas, as though his vision of beauty had kindled a flame in his brain that nothing on earth could quench. No—not even the terrible spreading radiations which were even now a part of him, a seal of destruction on his flesh and his bones.

Holden's work consumed him as it had consumed Rembrandt, Keats, Mendelssohn, Tchaikovsky. He remembered how Proust, gasping for breath, had staggered to his desk on the day of his death, to finish his last and greatest novel.

Holden told himself fiercely that he

must summon a like courage—must paint until the pain in his arms became unbearable, until the brush dropped from his leaping fingers.

If only his memories were less bewildering in their richness! There were so many of them and they clamored so insistently for expression.

A boy alone with his thoughts, staring across a shadowed brook at a leaping trout. A toy fire engine, rusting in a woodshed choked with dust. Night on a lake in the mountains, a swaying rowboat and the chirp of crickets.

High school. Football in the russet autumn, with woodsmoke rising into the clear sky. The slowly dawning worlds of art and the natural sciences and the deathless song of youth in the early novels of H. G. Wells.

College. Chess and mathematics—and someone arguing about a smelly briar pipe. Was it better to scrape out the dottle or let the bowl alone?

The girl next door—and the one at the other side of town. The girl he'd met at the sophomore prom, walking in a cornfield with the sun in her hair. He'd stopped and kissed her, not quite meaning to.

People who grew old deliberately were of another breed. He'd wanted to stay twenty-two forever, for his love of life was a pure flame. Well . . . he was thirty-four now, and it was the world that had grown old. So old that the death it harbored was reaching out for him.

The beginning of World War II . . . a hill in Italy . . . the red dawn over Salerno . . .

He'd known Langley a long time. A sound man, Langley, an able physicist, but—literal! Couldn't see a sunset for the trees, and—the spreading dust.

Hiroshima. The End of World War II.

Humanity had known that another war would destroy the dreams of men along with their bodies. But how could men

with warring impulses tame that wild steed, electric with the power of exploding suns?

On the little square television screen in Langley's laboratory, one warning, over and over, like a motif from *Todtentanz*. "The guided missiles are still descending! Stay indoors! Take shelter underground!"

He'd clicked off the screen because he couldn't endure watching despairing fear become a certainty in the eyes of men like himself.

He had to get a timeless perspective to paint at all.

Was that selfish—inhuman even? He didn't think so. Only the dream was eternal. The rest was sound and fury signifying—the end of pain.

Holden was still painting when the roar of the counters became a dirge.

**T**HE BODY of the alien gleamed like an iridescent spiderweb in the waning sunlight. Pictures formed in its mind as it gazed down at the shattered laboratory, the radiation-riddled skeletons, and the painting that had become a problem and a challenge.

When in motion the alien resembled a gigantic scorpion, but when it settled itself in repose it became a weaving blob of light, wrapped in a pulsing aura of thought.

The alien was accompanied by its mate

and others of its kind. The spaceship which had brought the aliens from their home planet in the Sixth Galaxy to the third planet of an unexplored solar system close to the core of space carried instruments of science which could be used for purposes of research or defense.

But the aliens had quickly discovered that only research would be needed here, for the planet had been ravaged by the energy locked up within one of the smaller units of matter.

It seemed unlikely that any of the inhabitants could have survived so terrible a scourge.

Had the inhabitants released the energy themselves?

The problem was to reconstruct an inhabitant, and explore the planet's history through the medium of a living mind.

Could an inhabitant be reconstructed from a visual impression reproduced in pigments—obviously made by the inhabitant?

The alien thought so.

No two living creatures thought alike, and their thought patterns were implicit in their handiwork, their creations in stone and metal, even in gaudy colors on a fabric so flimsy that it could have been destroyed in the alien's claw as easily as a film of mist.

Once the thought pattern had been reconstructed, restoring the physical body would present no problem at all. The

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spinning of a matter-rebuilding web would take care of that. For were not all physical bodies reflections of a multi-dimensional thought-pattern in the Eternal Now?

The inhabitant could be brought back to life as surely as though he had never died.

"His skeleton is still intact!" a companion voice said. "We could build on that!"

Flourishing its massive foreclaws, the alien turned to look at its scientist mate.

"We could—but why bother? We'll build a complete new body. The key pattern is there, implicit in his handiwork. The web will fill in the gaps."

The pulsing deepened about the alien's head. "Fortunately the catastrophe which destroyed the inhabitant's body has preserved his handiwork. The radiations have not only energized the pigments—they have altered the physical structure of the fabric itself!"

"It is powerful—that creation!" came the pulsing agreement. "I'm beginning to feel it too—the entire shining fabric of his thoughts. He was a big-brained biped who reveled in the impressions of his senses. He was consumed by the beauty of his world, and he put all of himself into his handiwork!"

"Yes . . . there is tragedy there too. Beauty and compassion and grief. A mist on the hills as the day draws to a close . . . a flaming redness lighting up the dawn. Laughter and gay mockery . . . and a sadness like a great sea, ebbing, flowing. If ever a living form lived and suffered and triumphed over his pain—"

"Have you noticed? He had a complex, subtle brain, but his vision was as limpid as a pool of still water, depth beyond depth. We must see to it that he lives again!"

"But we may have to leave at any moment," the other reminded. "The terrible, destroying fires have burned them-

selves out, but even a faint residue could injure us genetically. If we find that the radiations are still dangerous—"

"The web will complete the restoration. It will take time, of course. We may have to leave before it is done. But we'll know that he has returned to live out his life to complete fulfillment."

"As a replica of himself . . ."

"He won't know that. He'll simply return with all of his memories intact. I'd . . . like that. Wouldn't you? Just knowing, I mean."

"Yes."

For a moment the two aliens remained silent, their thoughts pulsing in close inner harmony. Then they were in motion again.

Approaching the canvas, they busied themselves with their exacting task, twitching and weaving about until a thin, gleaming transparency floated from them over the ravaged soil.

The transparency wavered and changed shape, becoming conical and then spherical. Like a great, rainbow-hued water bubble it settled to rest directly in front of the canvas, its base flattening as the aliens continued to knead it with their minds.

Deep-cradled were the first faint stirrings of life; fluted and fragile, like a sighing cocoon caught in a gust of luminous wind. A twisting and a swaying and a hungry reaching out for a nourishing flame that was both breath and substance.

Breath and more life . . . and ever more life . . . until there came into view in the depths of the web the outlines of a human shape.

**T**HE BURST of flame was incredible—a white and dazzling flare crossing Holden's returning vision, burning into his brain.

He was lying flat on his back, staring straight up at the sky. He could see the red disk of the sun, sinking into clouds

that seemed to be writhing in the glow of some great fire from the depths of space.

Were the clouds explosions, shaking the earth? Something in Holden's mind rejected that. The clouds were mushroom-shaped, but they floated high above the earth and seemed to trail off from a long, cylindrical shape which was dwindling skyward directly overhead.

The light seemed to fuse with the clouds, to blend with them, as the receding cylinder plunged deeper and deeper into the sky.

The cylinder was gone.

Holden sat up. For an instant his mind seemed to scesaw back and forth across black gulfs of emptiness. Then his faculties steadied and the curving surface above him resolved itself into a glowing web, veined and rainbow-colored.

He thought for a moment before moving again. There was no yardstick he could apply to a thing so incredible. Had the laboratory collapsed? Was he staring up through a curving, heat-fused pane of glass wedged in the debris, but open to the sky? It seemed unlikely, for he could see the entire wide sweep of the horizon, stretching away on a level with his drawn-up knees.

Holden was suddenly aware of a stirring in the gleaming convexity which arched above him. A swirling and a bubbling, as though the sunlight had turned it molten.

He opened his eyes wide. The surface above him was melting, whipping away and evaporating as he stared—like a cobweb vanishing in a blast of heat.

Memory had returned now in a full, rushing flood. He remembered the agony in his limbs, the brush dropping from his stiffening fingers. He remembered Langley dragging himself along the floor, smiling a little despite his torment.

He was free now to get up, to walk in any direction. But he did not get up. With a hoarse cry he dragged himself forward

until he was stopped by a vision of horror—stark, mind-numbing.

The two skeletons seemed to grin up at him in the reddening sunlight. He was swaying on his knees directly above the fleshless eye-sockets of one, and by simply stretching out his hand he could have touched the long bones of the other.

After the first flush of realization died away, Holden found himself staring at a single bright object. A small object, trivial in itself.

A gold ring, oddly lumpish now, welded into a mass of radioactive isotope, but still recognizable. The ring was on the second finger of a skeletal hand.

As Holden stared down at it, the blood drained from his face, leaving it ashen.

Slowly, like a man in the grip of an overmastering compulsion, Holden stared at his own firm-fleshed hand.

The ring he wore wasn't lumpish. But the two were identical . . . and identical . . . and identical . . .

It seemed to Holden that his mind had become a vast, echoing vault. A whispering gallery, filled with shadows that plucked and tore at his sanity.

No man was meant to endure this and live.

FIRST DAY. He was deathly calm now—as calm as the distant ruined cities, mouldering into dust. As calm as the night of stars which arched above him, and the waste which stretched around him.

Fortunately hunger had not touched him yet; only the goading reality of his rebirth. He had returned to a world that had died, had been reborn in Time in some strange and unfathomable way. Not as an infant in a recurring cycle of eternity, but as a grown man with all of his faculties intact.

Far to the east the outlines of a vast ruin rose against the sky, but some instinct warned him to avoid the cities.

Here in the open countryside there was no detectable radiation, but when he knelt to drink at the edge of sluggish streams which mirrored his haggard features he could not repress a shudder. How could he be sure that the water wasn't contaminated? How could he be sure . . . of anything?

Second day. Hunger was a goad now. No animal cry broke the stillness, but there were a few berries, growing on dwarfed, pallid shrubs which hugged the ravaged soil like little white ghosts.

Were the berries tiny carriers of death? Was there a hidden, grinning skull at the heart of each berry, waiting to be laid bare?

In sudden desperation he plucked one and crushed it in his palm. The juice was sweet-scented. Summoning courage, he picked a handful of berries and devoured them greedily, like a famished wayfarer in a parched and intolerable wilderness.

Third day. Life! Animal life! In the air, in burrows opening on a bleak sea wall. Something huge and lobsterlike moved on a shining beach, dragging itself sluggishly over the sand. He saw a gull, far out, skimming the waves. In deep rock pools sea anemones unfolded their flowerlike fronds, and the badly grown cucumber bodies of sea gherkins pulsed with the pulsing tides.

Had all life retreated to the sea?

Turning shakily, he moved inland again.

In a valley of shadows he saw a humming bird. A flash of brilliance, the incredible whirring of a tiny, air-borne nite a yard from his face. He saw it clearly for an instant as it settled to rest on one of the dwarf shrubs.

A wedge of turned-up earth gave the mole away. Using his hands as a trowel, Holden widened the excavation, and caught the little beast as it scurried into the sunlight.

It was a hammer-headed mole, as blind

as a bat. He hated killing it, but he knew that his life would be forfeit if he did not eat.

That night, replenished, he sank to rest beneath the only tree he'd seen in a two-day search. A scrub oak, filled with little animal whisperings. There was more life up there. Tomorrow he'd set a few snares!

**F**OURTH day. The cave rose bleakly at the edge of a rock-strewn waste, but Holden's thoughts were the opposite of bleak as he approached it with a brace of brightly-plumed wildfowl dangling from his waist.

It was a little wonderful that he could have brought two birds down with a slingshot. Wonderful, too, that there should be a cave so close to the scene of his triumph.

If he could get a fire started—he'd be dining on roasted quail!

Holden straightened his shoulders. The old visions were coming back, surging back now like a singing flame. A man who loved life as he did could never stay wretched.

True, loneliness could leave a torturing ache. But there had been joyful hermits before in the world.

A girl walking in a cornfield, with the sun in her hair. He'd stopped and kissed her, not quite meaning to. . . .

Well . . . he'd have to get over that, he told himself fiercely. But now the flame was dwindling again, sweeping from him in gusts of chill mockery.

With an angry shrug he quickened his stride and entered the cave.

They stood in flickering firelight—five men and three women and a girl with wide dark eyes who didn't seem quite a woman yet. Not quite eighteen, Holden thought. Then—startlement exploded in his brain! A dazzling burst of startlement and a high-leaping wonder that held him rooted to the earth.

Living men and women, solid as the animals he'd trapped—uncouthly clad in the skins of animals, but not uncouth in their primitive human dignity and bronze-limbed strength; standing about a rude fire like a stone-age museum group, with straggly hair on their shoulders, leaping shadows at their backs!

The new barbarians—the ones he'd scoffed at, refused to believe in. The survivors, sinking back into barbarism, living by their wits, by sheer animal cunning, as the terrible spreading dust lost its power to cripple and kill.

No, no—he was imagining this!

But if he was imagining it why were they all about him now?

Why were they exploring the strength of his arms with iron fingers and making strange signs in the air before his face, as though he'd brought something evil into the cave with him?

Suddenly Holden knew that the cave dwellers were no illusion, for their angrily muttered words made sense.

He was a stranger, an outsider. Did he come as an enemy or a friend? If he came as a friend did he come as one wishing to throw in his lot with a tribe of proved courage—a great and fearless tribe with many talents?

If so—what could he do? What was he *good* at? Was he a mighty hunter, a trapper of beasts? The birds he carried—how had he caught them? He carried

no weapons, so perhaps he was not a hunter. Was he then a fire-maker? A healer?

Holden retreated a step before the press of gleaming bodies and the faces he had ceased to fear now, though some were still etched with a sharp hostility and others with dread. He smiled and made a deprecatory gesture.

But his voice, when it rang out in the shadows, was vibrant with pride. "I am an artist!" he said.

THE CAVE wall was high and smooth.

A flickering stone lamp stood at Holden's feet and his palette was a crude one, fashioned of birch-bark. Crude too were the pigments which covered it—the distilled juice of berries and red and yellow ochre drawn from the earth.

But the vision in Holden's mind was as bright as ever. He was putting all of himself into his work, bringing an imperishable dream to fulfillment again. Shadows flickered on the walls of the cave and danced on his bare, bronzed shoulders and the animal skin which hung in loose folds from his lithe torso.

Holden knew as he painted that he was creating something that would live forever in one deathless moment.

For Roger Holden was living at the top of his bent, shutting out Time as he struggled to surpass himself.



## "Elementary!" says Watson

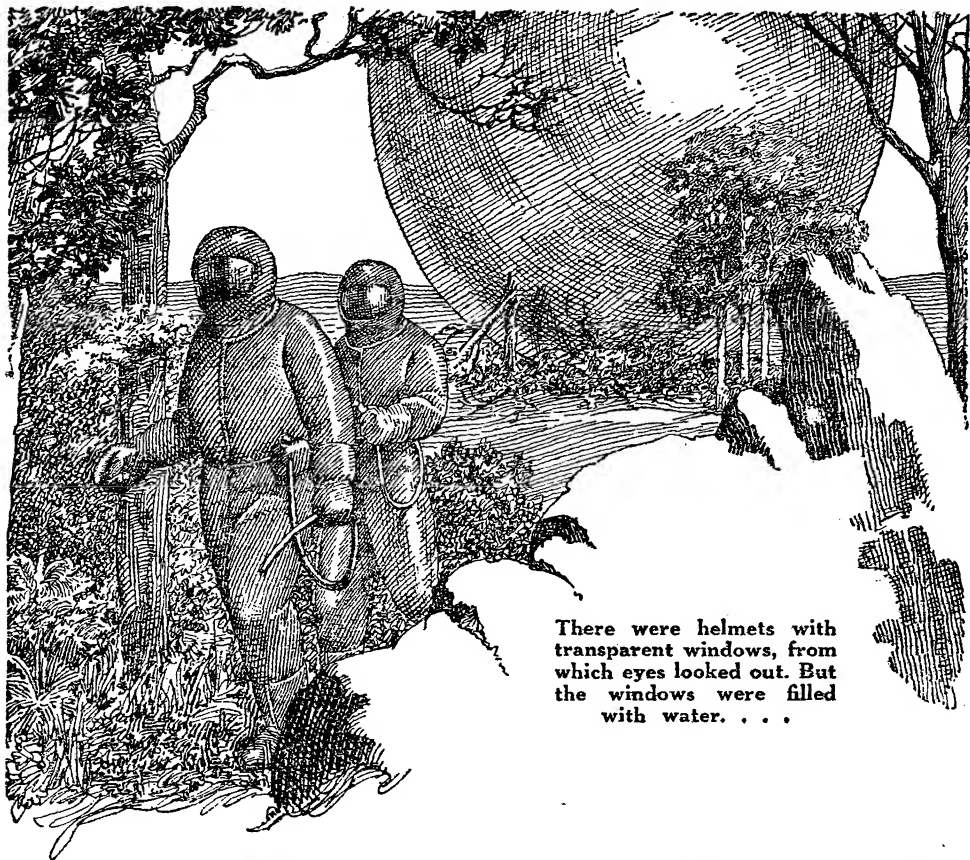
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By  
**MURRAY  
LEINSTER**





There were helmets with transparent windows, from which eyes looked out. But the windows were filled with water. . . .

*Tork was a simple man of the caves. How could he dream that the star box held the power to make his people gods—or only a lost memory in stone?*

# THIS STAR SHALL BE FREE

THE URGE was part of an Antarean experiment in artificial ecological imbalance, though of course the cave-folk could not guess that. They were savages with no interest in science or, indeed, in anything much except filling their bellies and satisfying other primal urges. They inhabited a series of

caves in a chalk formation above a river that ran through primordial England and France before it joined the Rhine and emptied into the sea.

They did not understand the urge at all—which was natural. It followed the disappearance of the ship from Antares by a full two hours, so they saw no con-



nection between the two. Anyhow, it was just a vague, indefinite desire to move to the eastward—an impulse for which they had no explanation whatever.

Tork was spearing fish from a rock out in the river when the ship passed overhead. He was a young man, still gangling and awkward. He wasn't up to a fight with One-Ear, yet, and had a bad time in consequence. One-Ear was the boss male of the cave-dwellers' colony in the cliff over the river. He wanted to chase Tork away or kill him, and Tork had to be on guard every second. But he felt safe out on his rock.

He had just speared a fine ganoid when he heard a howl of terror from the shore. He jerked his head around. He saw Bent-Leg, the other adult male, go hobbling in terror toward his own cave-mouth, and he saw One-Ear knock two of his wives and three children off the ladder to his cave, so he could get in first. The others shrieked and popped into whatever crevice was at hand, including the small opening in which Tork himself slept when he dared. Then there was stillness.

Tork stared blankly. He saw no cause for alarm ashore. He ran his eyes along the top of the cliff. He saw birch and beech and oak, growing above the chalk. His eyes swept the stream. There were old-men's stories of sea-monsters coming all the way up from the deep bay (which would some day be the English Channel). But the surface of the river was undisturbed. He scanned the farther shore. There were still a few of the low-browed ogres from whom Tork's people had taken this land, but Tork knew that he could outrun or outswim them. And there were none of them in sight, either.

All was quiet. Tork grew curious, and stood up on his rock. Then he saw the ship.

It was an ovoid of polished, silvery metal. It was huge, two hundred feet by three hundred, and it floated tranquilly a

hundred yards above the tree-tops. It moved to the stream, and then drifted smoothly in a new direction up the river. It was going to pass directly over Tork's head.

It was so strange as to be unthinkable, and therefore it smote Tork with a terror past expression. He froze into a paralytic stillness, staring up at it. It made no sound. It had no features. Its perfectly reflecting sides presented to Tork's dazed eyes a distorted oval reflection of the river and the stream-banks and the cliffs and all the countryside for many miles around. He did not recognize the reflection. To him it seemed that the thing's hide was mottled, and that the mottlings shifted in a horrifying fashion.

It floated on, unwavering, as if its mass were too great to be affected by the gentle wind. Tork stood frozen in the ultimate catalepsy of a man faced with terror neither to be fought or fled from. He did not see the small, spidery frameworks built out from the shining hull. He did not see the tiny tubes moving this way and that, as if peering. He did not see several of the tubes converging upon him. He was numbed, dazed.

Nothing happened. The silver ovoid swam smoothly up above the river. Presently the river curved, and the ship from Antares went on tranquilly above the land. A little later it rose to clear a range of low hills. Later still, it vanished behind them.

**W**HEN he recovered, Tork swam ashore with his fish, shouting vaingloriously that there was nothing to be afraid of. Heads popped timorously into view. Children appeared first, then grown-ups. One-Ear appeared last of all, with his red-rimmed eyes and whiskery truculence. There were babblings. Then—they died down. The cave-folk could not talk about the thing. They had no words for it. There were no

precedents, however far-fetched, to compare it with. They babbled of their fright, but they could not talk about its cause.

In an hour, it appeared to have been forgotten. Tork cooked his fish. When his belly was quite full, a young girl named Berry stopped cautiously some yards away from him. She was at once shy and bold.

"You have much fish," she said, with a toss of her head.

"Too much," said Tork complacently. "I need a woman to help eat it."

He looked at her. She was most likely One-Ear's daughter, but she was slim and curved and desirable where he was bloated and gross and bad-tempered. An interesting, speculative idea occurred to Tork. He grinned tentatively.

She said, "One-Ear smelled your fish. He sent me to get some. Shall I tell him he is a woman if he eats it?"

Her eyes were intent; not quite mocking. Tork scowled. To let her give such a message would be to challenge One-Ear to mortal combat, and One-Ear was twenty years older and sixty pounds heavier than Tork. He tossed the girl a fish, all cooked and greasy as it was.

"I give you the fish," said Tork grandly. "Eat it or give it to One-Ear. I don't care!"

She caught the fish expertly. Her eyes lingered on him as she turned away. She turned again to peer at him over her shoulder as she climbed the ladder to One-Ear's cave.

At just about that time the urge came to Tork. He suddenly wanted to travel to eastward.

Travel, to the cave-folk, was peril undiluted. They had clubs and fish-spears which were simply sharpened sticks. They had nothing else. Wolves had not yet been taught to fear men. The giant hyena still prowled the wild. There were cave-bears and innumerable beasts no man of Tork's people could hope to cope with

save by climbing the nearest tree. To want to travel anywhere was folly. To travel eastward, where a saber-tooth was rumored to den, was madness. Tork decided not to go.

But the urge remained exactly as strong as before. He summoned pictures of monstrous dangers. The urge did not deny them. It did not combat them. It simply ignored them. Tork wanted to travel to the east. He did not know why.

After half an hour, during which Tork struggled with himself, he saw the girl Berry come out of One-Ear's cave. She began to crack nuts for One-Ear's supper, using two stones. One-Ear's teeth were no longer sound enough to cope with nuts.

Tork looked at her. Presently an astounding idea came to him. He saw that the girl glanced furtively at him sometimes. He made a secret beckoning motion with his hand. After a moment, Berry got up and moved. She threw a handful of nutshells into the stream. She stood idly watching them float away. She was only a few feet from Tork.

"I go to the east," said Tork in a low voice, "to look for a better cave than here."

Her eyes flicked sidewise to him, but she gave no other sign. She did not move away, either. Tork elaborated: "A fine cave. A deep cave, where there is much game."

She glanced at him again out of the corners of her eyes. Tork's own eyes abruptly burned. He said, greatly daring: "Then I will come and take you to it!"

The girl tossed her head. Among the cave-folk, property-right in females—even one's own daughters—preceded all other forms of possession. Were One-Ear to hear of this invasion of his proprietary rights, there would be war to the death immediately. But the girl did not move away; she did not laugh. Tork felt vast pride and enormous ambition stir within

him. After a long, breathless instant the girl turned away from the water and went back to the pounding of nuts for One-Ear. On the way her eyes flickered to Tork. She smiled a faint, almost frightened smile. That was all.

But it was enough to send Tork off within the next half-hour with his club in his hand and high romantic dreamings in his heart—and a quite sincere conviction that he was moving eastward to find a cave in which to set up housekeeping.

Because of this, the journey became adventure. Once Tork was treed by a herd of small, piggish animals rather like the modern peccary. Once he fled to the river and dived in because of ominous rustlings which meant he was being stalked by something he didn't wait to identify. And when, near nightfall, he picked a tree to sleep in, and started to climb it, he was halfway up to its lowest branch when he saw the ropelike doubling of the thickness of a slightly higher branch. He got down without rousing the great serpent, and went shivering for three miles—eastward—before he chose another tree to sleep in. But before he went to sleep he arranged these incidents into quite heroic form, suitable to be recounted to Berry.

**T**ORK went on at sunrise. He paused once to stuff himself with blackberries—and left that spot via nearby trees when something grunting and furry charged him. In mid-morning he heard a far-away, earth-shaking sound that could come from nothing but saber-tooth himself. Then he heard a curious popping noise that he had never heard before, and the snarl ceased abruptly. The hair fairly stood up on Tork's head. But the urge to move eastward was very strong indeed now. It seemed to grow stronger as he traveled. No other creatures seemed to feel it, however. Squirrels frisked in the trees. Once he saw a mon-

strous elk—the so-called Irish elk—whose antlers had a spread of yards. The monster looked at him with a stately air and did not flee. Tork was the one who gave ground, because the cave-folk had no missile weapons save stones thrown by hand. He made a circuit around the great beast.

Then he abruptly ran into tumbled ground, where there were practically no trees but very many rocks. It would be a perfect place for lying-in-wait. Also he saw the mouths of several very promising caves. If the urge had not become uncontrollably strong, he would have stopped to investigate them. But he went on. Once his sensitive nostrils smelled carrion, mingled with the musky animal odor of a great carnivore. Mentally he went into gibbering terror. In his mind he fled at top speed. But the urge was incredibly strong. He went on like someone possessed. He had freedom to dodge, to creep stealthily, to take every precaution for silence and to avoid the notice of the animals which had no need to fear one club-armed man. He could even run—provided he fled to eastward. It was no longer possible for him to turn back.

The urge continued to strengthen. After some miles he became an automaton—a blank-faced gangling figure, sun-bronzed and partly clad in an untanned hide. He carried a club and in his belt there was a sharpened stick which was his idea of a fish-spear. He trudged onward, his eyes unseeing, automatically adjusting his steps to the ground, apathetically moving around great masses of stone in his way. He was, for a time, completely at the mercy of any carnivore which happened to see him.

He did not even falter when he saw the great, silvery ovoid which had passed over his head the day before. He marched toward it with glassy eyes and an expressionless face. Yet the shape was vastly more daunting on the ground than in

the air. It was still absolutely mirror-like on its outer surface. It still seemed featureless, because the spidery mounts of its scanning-tubes were tiny. But its monstrous size was more evident.

It rested on the ground on its larger, rounded end. Its smaller part pointed upward. It was three hundred feet high—three times the height of the tallest trees about it, some of which had been crushed by its weight as it descended. Their branches projected from beneath it. It was a gigantic silver egg, the height of a thirty-story building, and a city block thick. It rested on 'squashed oak-trees in completely enigmatic stillness, with no sign of life or motion anywhere about it.

Tork walked up to it stiffly, seeing nothing and hearing nothing. He moved into the very shadow of the thing. Then he stopped. The urge abruptly ceased.

Pure terror sent him into howling, headlong flight. And instantly the urge returned. Twenty yards from the outward-bulging silvery metal, he crashed to earth. Then he stood up and stiffly retraced his steps toward the ship. Again compulsion left him and he wailed and fled—and within twenty yards he slowed to a walk, and turned, and came back in blind obedience.

Ten times in all he tried to flee, and each time returned to the shadow of the motionless, mirror-like ovoid. The tenth time he stood still, panting, his eyes wild.

He saw his own reflection on the surface of the thing. He croaked at it, thinking that here was another captive. His image made faces at him, but no sound. He could not make it answer. In the end he turned his back upon it sullenly. He stood shivering violently, like any wild thing caught and made helpless.

Half an hour later he saw something moving across the ground toward the great silver egg. There was a faint, faint sound, and a gigantic curved section of the egg opened. Sloshing water poured out and made puddles. There was a smell as of the ocean. The approaching thing, a vehicle, floated nearer, six feet above-ground, with strange shapes upon it and a tawny-striped mass of fur which Tork knew could be nothing but saber-tooth. Tork trembled in every limb, but he knew he could not flee.

Just before the vehicle floated into the opening made by the dropped curved plate, two of the shapes descended from it and came curiously toward Tork.

He shook like an aspen-leaf. He half-grasped his club and half-raised it, but he was too much unnerved to attack.

The shapes regarded him interestedly. They wore suits of a rubbery fabric bulging as if from liquid within. There were helmets with transparent windows, from which eyes looked out. But the windows were filled with water.

The creatures from Antares halted

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some paces from Tork. One of them trained a small tube upon him, and immediately he seemed to hear voices.

"We called you here to be kind to you. We saw you yesterday, standing upon a rock."

Tork merely trembled. The second shape trained a tube upon him, and he heard another voice. There was no difference in the timbre, of course, because Tork's own brain was translating direct mental impressions into words; but he knew that the second figure spoke.

"It is an experiment, Man. We come from a far star, mapping out worlds our people may some day need. Yours is a good world, with much water. We do not care for the land. Therefore we do not mind being kind to you who live on the land. . . . You have fire."

Tork found his brain numbly agreeing. He thought of fire, and cookery, and the two creatures seemed to find his thoughts interesting.

"You have intelligence," said the first creature brightly, "and it has occurred to us to make an experiment in ecology. How do you get food?"

Tork grasped only the final sentence. Again he thought numbly. Gathering nuts. Picking berries. Spearing fish with a sharpened stick. Digging shellfish. Small animals such as rabbits and squirrels, knocked over by lucky stones. He thought also of One-Ear, who had been well-fed enough yesterday merely to demand fish. On other occasions he had come bellowing, club in hand, and chased Tork away from the food he had gathered for himself.

"That is bad," said the voice in Tork's mind, but it seemed amused. "We shall show you ways to get much food. All the food you desire. We shall show you defenses against animals. It will be interesting to see what comes of an ecological imbalance so produced. You will wait here."

THE TWO shapes moved away—they floated a little above the ground, Tork noted dazedly—and entered the ship. The curved plate closed behind them. There was a whistling of air somewhere. To a man of later millennia, the sound might have suggested a water-lock closing, being filled with water so that water-dwelling creatures could swim from it freely into the liquid-filled interior of the ship from Antares. To Tork, it suggested nothing.

Nothing happened for hours. Then, suddenly, Tork saw a great elk moving steadily and hypnotically toward the ship from Antares. It reached a spot less than fifty yards from the ship's side, and seemed suddenly to be released from compulsion. It turned and bounded away; then its flight slackened and stopped. It came back toward the ship. Fifty yards away, again it tried to escape, and again was recaptured.

Tork watched, wide-eyed.

Rabbits appeared, hopping toward the ship. They appeared by dozens and then by hundreds. The steady advance, converging from all directions, came to a halt in milling confusion at a fixed distance from the gigantic glistening egg.

The curved plate opened again, and again there was a great sloshing of water and the smell of the sea. Four or five shapes emerged, floating above the ground. Even before he saw tubes trained upon him, Tork was aware of fragments of thought-conversation.

"I acknowledge that an experiment on land cannot possibly affect our later use of this planet." Another intonation, indignant: "But it is cruel! Give these creatures unlimited food and the means of defense and you condemn their descendants to starvation!" Then other voices said disjointedly, "I insist that a new ecological balance of low birth-rate will result—" "Land-animals are of no concern to us—" "Stability of nature—"

"Some new factor will nullify the experiment absolutely—"

Tork was a savage. He was of the cave-folk, and he had never come into contact with an abstraction in his life. Because these were thoughts, he perceived them. He even understood them. But they had no reference to any of the other things in his mind or experience. So they lingered only like the fragments of a dream.

The creatures placed a sort of box before him. It seemed to Tork like a stone. There was a pattern of color leaning against it which after laborious study he discovered to be a reduced appearance of a human being. It was the first picture he had ever seen. Actually, it was a picture of him—the key pattern of the urge which had brought him, if the matter were fully understood. But he heeded the mental voices, referring to the box he thought a stone.

"This is a device which projects a desire. Since you are merely a man, we have stabilized the device so that it projects one desire only. That desire is of coming to the place from which the desire is projected. We drew you to this place by tuning the projection to you. It made you wish to come here."

Tork's brain assimilated the information after a fashion. Very patiently, the mental voices corrected his impressions. They went on:

"This device will now project only that desire, but we have left the tuning variable. Any human may change the tuning now. Stand close to the device and think of an animal, and the device will tune to animals of that sort and make them wish to come wherever the device may be."

Tork thought of saber-tooth, and cringed. The mental voices were amused, again.

"Even that is arranged. Here is a picture of a man. Look at it and you will think only of a man, and the device will only call man to you. Here also is a pic-

ture of an elk. Place this by the device and look at it, and your thoughts of elk will tune the device, so elk will wish to come to you. Rabbits—"

Tork was frightened. It would be pleasant enough to be able to make squirrels or rabbits—he saw hundreds of rabbits now, out of the corner of his eye—come to be knocked on the head. But an elk? What could a man do with an elk? An elk could trample and toss—

"Naturally," said the voice in his mind, with some dryness, "we give you safety from animals also, if you change your habits to make use of our gifts. We have made spears with points of stone, which you can soon learn to duplicate. With the picture-device you can draw animals to you, and with the spears you can kill them. Moreover—"

The voices in his mind went on and on. There were a bow and arrows. There were stone knives. For the purpose of the experiment, each instrument save the hypnotic device itself had been carefully designed to be understood by primitive minds.

"We of Antarés seek new worlds for our race to inhabit. We have chosen your world for later use, and shall remain upon it for perhaps a hundred of your years, to survey it. We shall be able to see the first results of what we do today. Then we shall go back to our own world, and when we return we will see the final result of our gifts to you. What happens on the land, of course, will not affect our use of the seas."

Another mental voice interrupted, protesting that the man was not given a fair chance to refuse the gifts. The instructor went on drily: "Your species can now multiply without limit. We think that you will overrun all the land and destroy all other animals for food, and ultimately destroy yourselves. But we are not sure. We are curious to learn. You can refuse the gift if you choose."

Tork blinked. He understood—temporarily. But he was human and a savage. The prospect of unlimited food outweighed all other possible considerations. He was frightened, but he wanted all the food that could be had. Definitely.

Instructions continued. Presently Tork understood the spears, and was naively astonished. He understood the bows and arrows, and was amazed. He grew excited. He wanted to use the marvelous new things. He felt that the shapes were amused by him.

The land-suited figures floated back to the water-lock of the ship. It closed. He was left alone. He fingered the weapons. Another great plate lowered. But this was not a lock; it was a window. A vast expanse of transparent stuff appeared. Behind it was water, and in the liquid the Antareans—no longer in their rubbery suits—swam within the great metal egg, watching.

Tork, newly instructed, examined the beautifully fashioned stone point of a spear, and then lifted the spear as he had been told to do. He remembered sharp-pointed, sharp-edged stones he had seen. He remembered stones breaking when struck together. He knew he could make a point like this. But—

He was a savage. He went to that extraordinary circular confusion where rabbits hopped hypnotically toward the great silver egg, and at a certain distance were released and turned to flee, and again became subject to the irresistible urge to approach it. Tork went out to them, his mouth slaverling.

He made a monstrous slaughter before it palled on him. Then he saw the elk. Fifty yards from the ship it stopped, and stared about it, and bounded away. It turned and came back toward the great ship until suddenly it stopped and stared. . . .

Tork killed it while it marched toward the ship in dazed obedience to the urge.

Then he went crazy with triumph. He gorged himself upon the raw flesh, and went back to the shadow of the ship—in his triumph he knew no more fear—and squatted down before the device he had been given. He thought of Berry. Inevitably his thoughts went also to One-Ear and to the other members of the cave-colony by the river. He wished each one of them to see his triumph and his greatness. With a reeking mass of raw meat beside him, he gloated over their admiration of him when they should come. . . .

THEY came. Berry remembered that Tork had gone to the east. She wished to follow him. One-Ear wished to go to the east. Somehow, in his fumbling brain, the urge became associated with notions of vast quantities of food. The women wished to go east. Seeking unconsciously for a reason, they decided that their children would be safer there. So the colony of cave-folk took up the march.

They did not all reach the giant egg. Bent-Leg succumbed to a giant hyena who tried to carry off one of his children. A woman died when she fell behind the others. The rest heard her shriek, but that was all. And there was one small boy missing when, moving like automata, the rest of the cave-people walked with blank faces and empty eyes to within yards of the grinning, triumphant Tork. Then they were released.

There was confusion and panic such as he had felt, until he seized them one by one and held them fast while he boasted and explained. Then they still cringed fearfully for a while—but there was food. One-Ear drooled when Tork thrust a monstrous haunch of elk-meat upon him. He squatted down and wolfed it, tending to snarl and glare with his wicked, red-rimmed eyes if anyone drew near. But there was food for all. More, there were



weapons. Tork shared them, expansively. Small boys killed rabbits. Women used the new stone knives and skinned them.

More humans came. They were not members of Tork's tribe, but fortunately Tork's people were so stuffed with food by the time the strangers came that they felt no inclination to rise and kill them. They howled with laughter at the strangers' release, instant panic and flight, and return and release and panic again. Presently, with vast amusement, they explained and offered food. The strangers stuffed themselves. Behind the great transparent window the Antareans swam and watched. The strangers were shown the new weapons. They wanted to try them. Tork languidly called more animals to be killed for demonstration—and food.

There was such festival and such feasting as had never before been known in the brief history of man. By the end of the second day, no fewer than fifty humans either gobbled at more food than they had ever seen before in their lives, or else slept the noisy slumber of repletion, while the Antareans watched.

On the third morning, without any notice, the ship rose quietly from the ground and sped skyward. A thousand feet up, it slanted toward the west, toward the great ocean in which an exploring party from Antares would be most interested.

The humans' first reaction to the de-

parture of the ship was panic. But Tork went to the box—the stone-that-calls-animals—and tried a new picture. He thought of graceful, timid deer. The device called a herd of the spotted creatures, and the cave-folk killed them, and were reassured.

The feasting might have gone on indefinitely, but that Tork was a savage and therefore like a child. He kept the neighborhood of the camp so crowded with food-animals that other creatures came of their own accord to prey on them. When the brutish roaring of the cave-bear was heard, terror fell upon the people. They seized the weapons and such food as they could carry, and they fled. Mostly, they scattered.

But Tork's own tribe naturally stayed together. It fled back toward its normal habitation, Tork carrying the stone-that-called-animals.

Tork and Berry dissuaded the new members of the tribe from looking covetously upon Berry. Berry, in fact, used a spear upon an admirer who was pressing Tork too hard with a club. But nevertheless, when Tork took possession of the one cave that had been empty in the chalk-cliff, Berry uttered a purely formal outburst of shrieks as he dragged her inside to begin housekeeping.

Her father, One-Ear, did not go to her rescue. He was stuffed to bursting with deer-meat, and he merely cocked a toler-

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ant, sleepy eye when his daughter was thus kidnapped from his very presence. In any case, he knew that she would have used a spear or knife on him or anybody else who interfered, so he merely belched slightly and settled back to slumber.

So Tork and Berry were married. But the end of the Antarean experiment was not yet.

Those who had been called to the shadow of the silver ship and there released, spread through the land. Most of them had not joined Tork's tribe. They had new, modern, priceless weapons. Non-possessors of beautiful, up-to-date flint spears tried to do murder for their possession. Their owners did a little murdering on their own. Possessors of spears and arrows which would actually cut and pierce were supermen. And in time it became apparent that a man who practiced and gained skill with the even more scientific bow and arrows was in a better position still to win wives and influence the next generation. So every human who saw or heard of the new weapons craved them passionately.

But, being humans and savages, they did not think of making them for themselves. They tried to get them from Tork and his tribe. At first they journeyed to the chalk-cliff village and asked for the new weapons, naively. For a little while, Tork was flattered and open-handed. Then he began to run short of worked flint. He grew stingy. He gave no more away. Then envious men grew desperate. They stole a spear here, an arrow-head there. . . . Tork had to establish a flint curtain, permitting no visitors in his village. He was unquestioned chieftain now. One-Ear had become too fat either to hunt or fight. And then furtive, burning-eyed sneak-thieves hung about the village. Some had traveled for weeks through dangers to make the flesh crawl, merely in hope of a chance to steal a spear or flint knife or arrowhead. They developed

great adeptness at such sneak-thievery.

There came a day when Tork's own personal spear was stolen from the mouth of his own cave. The thief was a youth of an unknown tribe who seemed to appear from nowhere. He dashed to the spear, seized it, and dived overboard with it. He swam underwater, rising only to gasp for breath, until so far offshore as to be out of range of thrown stones. Stone-tipped arrows were far too precious to be fired into the river. He got away.

**S**OMETHING had to be done. Tork needed that spear. Berry—being now a wife of some months' standing—upbraided him shrilly for his carelessness. Tork went gloomily into the deepest recesses of his cave, to think. The stone-which-called-animals was there. He regarded it miserably. He thought of the creatures who had given it to him. . . .

And Tork, the cave-man, had the inspiration which, in the bumbling, unintentional manner in which men achieve their greatest triumphs, actually determined the future of the human race.

There was a ship from Antares upon Earth. Its crew mapped the Earth's oceans for later colonists. The Antarean civilization was already a hundred thousand years old and very far advanced indeed. Men had just been introduced to flint spears and knives and arrows by the Antareans as an interesting experiment, to see what would happen. But Tork had an inspiration. He thought about the Antareans—while he squatted by the stone-which-calls-animals! It was the greatest single inspiration that any man has ever known. But for it, Earth would be an Antarean colony, and man—Man would be at best a tolerated animal on the continents the Antareans had no use for.

Tork squatted by the Antarean device and remembered the Antareans in their water-filled suits. Then he thought about them as they had looked in the huge

transparent window, paddling in the monster aquarium which was their ship and looking out at the cave-folk. The effort made his head hurt.

Presently he called Berry to help him think.

Presently Berry grew impatient. She had housewifely tasks to perform. She told Tork that there should be a picture to look at; then he could keep thinking of them without trouble.

It had long been a pastime of cave-children to press one hand against the cave wall and outline the out-spread fingers with charcoal. It produced a recognizable picture of a hand. Tork essayed to trace his memory of what Antareans looked like, on the wall. The result was extremely crude; but while he worked on it it was easy to keep thinking about Antareans.

Berry disapproved his drawing. She changed it, making it better. Presently One-Ear, wheezing, came amiably into the cave of his son-in-law and was informed of the enterprise. His sharp, red-rimmed eyes perceived flaws even in Berry's artistry. He was the first human critic. Other members of the tribe appeared. Some criticized. Others attempted drawings of their own. A continuous session of artistic effort began—with everybody thinking about Antareans all the time.

Of course, the Antareans felt the urge. Perhaps at the beginning it was very faint. But the cave-folk's memories of the Antareans grew sharper as they improved their drawings. The tuning of the device improved. And the impulse to move toward the calling device grew stronger. At best it was nagging. In the end it grew unbearable.

So there came a day when the great silver ovoid appeared in the sky to westward. It came swiftly, undeviatingly, toward the cliff-village. It landed on the solid ground above the caves. Instantly it

had landed, it was within the space where the call did not operate, and its crew was freed of the urge. The ship took off again, instantly. But instantly it was back in the overwhelming grip of the device the Antareans themselves had made. It returned, and took off and returned, and took off and returned. . . .

Presently it settled down solidly on the plateau above the river. Tork went beaming to meet the land-suited creatures who came out of the water-lock. Two figures floated toward him, menacingly. Voices came in his brain, unreasonably irritated. One said severely: "Man, you should not use the calling device we gave you to call *us*!"

"We need more spears," said Tork, beaming, "and bows and arrows and knives. So we called you to ask you to give them to us."

Crackling, angry thought came into his mind. The Antareans raged. Tork could not understand it. He regarded them blankly. More Antareans came out. He caught comprehensible fragments of other thoughts.

"So long as they think about us we are helpless to leave! We cannot go beyond the space of freedom. . . ." Another voice said furiously, "We cannot let mere animals call us! We must kill them!" Another voice said reasonably: "Better destroy the device. That will be enough. After all, the experiment—"

Then a dry voice asked, "Where is the device?"

The creatures fretted. Tork stood hopefully, waiting for them to give him spears and knives and arrow-heads. He was aware of highly technical conversation. The Antareans located the device. It was deep in the sloping chalk cliff below the ship. But in order for an Antarean to get to it, he would first have to go away from it, to get down the cliff. And he could not go away from it!

A crackling mental voice suggested that

they call the humans to them—away from the device. But the same objection applied. In order to approach a similar device inside the ship, the humans in the caves would have to go away from it, and they couldn't do that, either. It was a perfect stalemate. The Antareans were trapped.

They even considered blasting the cliff, to smash the instrument they had presented to Tork. But anything that would smash the device would blow up the ship. The hundred-thousand-year-old Antarean civilization was helpless against the naive desires of cave-men who simply wanted more pieces of worked flint.

"Man," snapped a voice in Tork's mind, "how did you creatures keep your thought steadily upon us so that we were called?"

"We made pictures of you," said Tork happily. "It was not easy to do, but we did it."

He beamed at them. There was pained silence. Then a mental voice said bitterly: "We will give you the spears and arrows, Man, if you will destroy every one of the pictures."

"We will do that," promised Tork brightly, "because now we can draw them again when we need you."

He seemed to hear groans inside his head. But the Antareans were civilized, after all. He seemed also to hear wry chucklings. And the dry voice said, inside his skull: "It is agreed. Go down and blot out the pictures of us. We will give you what you wish. Then we can go away."

"And—you will never be able to summon us again, Man! We had intended to stay on this earth for a hundred of your years, and if our experiment seemed too deadly to you, we would have stopped it. But now we will not take that risk. Your species is a land-species, and we are of the sea, but we think it best that you disappear. We have given you the means to

destroy yourselves. We will depart and let you do so. Now go and blot out the pictures."

Tork went happily down into his cave. He commanded the wiping-out of the pictures of Antareans. Within an hour the ship was gone. And this time it rose straight into the sky, as if it weren't coming back.

At first Tork was made happy by a huge new store of worked flint; but within two months disaster fell. The pictures of animals—so needful when using the Antarean device—blew into a cooking-fire and burned. Then there was deep mourning, and Tork and Berry and all the tribe tried earnestly to call back the ship to get a fresh supply.

But nothing happened.

This was catastrophe; they could no longer call animals to be killed. But then Berry suggested re-drawing the burned pictures on the cave's walls, and again art was attempted, by men working from the motive which has produced most of the great art-works of earth. . . to get something to eat.

The Antarean device worked just as well with pictures of the cave-folk's own drawing, as with those the Antareans had provided. But of course the Antareans could not know about it, because they had left the planet altogether. . . .

Tork and Berry lived long lives and had many offspring, all of whom thrived mightily because of the Antarean experiment. Of course, the experiment was not ended. In time, the tribe in the chalk-cliff village had increased so much in numbers that there was lack of room for its members. Colonies were sent out from it, and they thrived, too. And every colony carried with it three distinct results of the Antarean experiment in ecological imbalance.

One was stone weapons, which in time they rather painfully learned to make for themselves. Another was the belief that it

was a simple trick to call animals to be killed. The actual Antarean device—being tucked away in the back of Tork's cave—in time got covered over with rubbish and in two generations was forgotten. Since it needed no attention, it got none. In time, when its power grew weaker and its effect less, nobody even thought to uncover and tinker with it. And the third result of the Antarean contact with Tork's tribe was the practice of drawing and painting pictures of animals on cave-walls. The art of those Cro-Magnon artists is still admired.

The experiment still went on. Men learned to make weapons. Presently they discovered metal. The spears and arrow-heads became bronze, and then iron, and presently gunpowder replaced bow-strings to hurl metal missiles. Later still there was the atom bomb. In the art line, there were Praxiteles and Rodin and Michael Angelo and Picasso. . . . And the consequences of the experiment continued to develop. . . .

**A** GOOD thirty thousand years after the time of Tork, the Antareans decided that they needed the oceans of Earth for the excess population of several already-colonized planets. They prepared a colonizing fleet. The original survey was not complete, but it was good enough to justify a full-scale expedition for settlement.

More than two million Antareans swam in the vessels which launched themselves into space to occupy Earth. It was purely by accident that members of a society of learned Antareans, going over the original survey reports, came upon the record of the experiment. The learned society requested, without much hope, that an effort be made to trace the ancient meddling with the laws of nature, and see if any results could be detected.

The Antarean fleet came out of overdrive beyond Jupiter and drove in toward Earth with placid confidence. There was blank amazement on board when small spacecraft hailed the newcomers with some belligerence. The Antareans were almost bewildered. There was no intelligent race here. . . . But they sent out a paralyzing beam to seize one ship and hold it for examination. Unfortunately, the beam was applied too abruptly and tore the Earth ship to pieces.

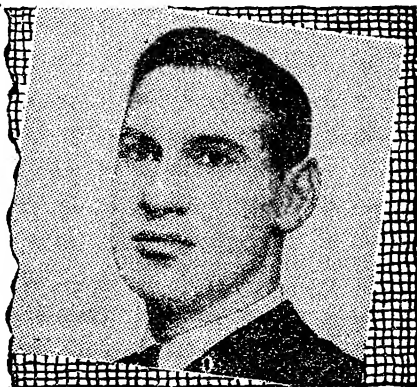
So the many-times removed great-great-grandchildren of Tork and Berry and the others of the cave-folk tribe—they blasted the Antarean fleet in seconds, and then very carefully examined the wreckage. They got an insterstellar drive out of their examination, which well paid for the one lost Earth ship. But the Antarean learned society never did learn the results of that experiment in ecological imbalance, started thirty thousand years before.

In fact, the results aren't all in yet.

## REPORTER REPORTS ON SWITCH TO CALVERT

WASHINGTON, D. C.—Arnold Fine, Washington reporter and night club editor, flashes this news about today's whiskies. "Switch to Calvert," he says. "I have. Calvert honestly is lighter, smoother, milder."

CALVERT RESERVE BLENDED WHISKEY—86.8 PROOF—65% GRAIN NEUTRAL SPIRITS. CALVERT DISTILLERS CORP., N.Y.C.



She was mewing a blue streak. Her fur was standing up all over, and her tail was three times its usual size.



# CHILD of VOID

*It was the sort of place where water ran uphill and unexpected things happened . . . where the tiny wizards waited at the threshold — ready to pour madness over the Earth — if only young Eddie would let them!*

ISCHEENAR is his name, and he lives in the big toe of my left foot. He's fairly quiet during the day, except that now and then he makes my foot twitch. But at night he comes out and sits on my knee and says all sorts of hateful things. Once he suggested—

By MARGARET ST. CLAIR

But I didn't mean to tell about Ischeenar yet. I suppose I got off on him thinking about the fire and all that. It was after the fire that he got into my foot. But I want to tell this in order, the way it happened, and I ought to begin at the beginning. I suppose that means telling about how we happened to go to Hidden Valley to live.

Uncle Albert killed himself and left Hidden Valley to mom in his will. I didn't want to go there. We had visited Hidden Valley once or twice when I was little, and I hated it. It gave me the creeps. It was the kind of place you see articles about in the Sunday supplement—a place where water flows uphill and half the time the laws of gravity don't work, a place where sometimes a rubber ball will weigh three or four pounds and you can look out the upstairs window and see a big blue lake where the vegetable garden ought to be. You never could depend on things being normal and right.

But mom wanted to go. She said there was a nice little house we could live in, an artesian well with the best water in the world, and good rich soil for growing our own vegetables. There was even a cow and some chickens. Mom said we could be a lot more comfortable there than in the city, and live better. She said we'd get used to the funny things and they wouldn't bother us. And though she didn't say so, I knew she thought I'd be happier away from people, on a farm.

Mom's been awfully good to me. She kept on with the massage and exercises for my back for years after the doctors said it was no use. I wish I could do more for her. Her ideas are usually pretty good, and when I've gone against them I've been sorry. When you think about it, mom is generally right.

So we went to Hidden Valley, mom and Donnie (that's my younger brother) and I. It was worse than I had thought it was going to be. The place was still

queer enough to scare you purple, but besides that there was something new, a kind of heavy depression in the air.

It was terrible. At first it made you feel like you'd like to put your head up and howl the way a dog does; then you felt too worn out and miserable and unhappy to have energy left for howling.

It got worse with every hour we stayed there. By the time we'd been in Hidden Valley for two days mom and I were looking at each other and wondering which of us would be the first to suggest going back to the city. I kept thinking about how sensible Uncle Albert had been to blow himself up with the dynamite. Even Donnie and his kitten felt the depression; they sat huddled up together in a corner and looked miserable.

Finally mom said, in a kind of desperate way, "Eddie, why don't you see what you can get on your radio set? It might cheer you up." Mom doesn't give up easily.

I thought it was a silly idea. I've been a ham operator ever since I was fifteen, and it's a lot of fun. I enjoy it more than anything. But when you're feeling as bad as I was then, you don't want to talk to anyone. You just want to sit and wonder about dying and things like that.

My stuff had been dumped down all in a corner of the little beaver-boarded living room. I hadn't felt chipper enough to do anything about getting it set up, though Uncle Albert had put in a private power system, and there was electricity in the house. After mom asked me for the second time, though, I got up and hobbled over to my equipment. And here a funny thing happened. I'd hardly started hunting around for a table to put my stuff on when my depression began to lift.

It was wonderful. It was like being lost in the middle of a dark, choking fog and then having the fog blow away and the bright sun shine out.

The others were affected the same way. Donnie got a piece of string and began



playing with the kitten, and the kitten sat back and batted at the string with its paws the way cats do when they're playful. Mom stood watching me for a while smiling, and then she went out in the kitchen and began to get supper. I could smell the bacon frying and hear her whistling "Onward Christian Soldiers." Mom whistles that way when she's feeling good.

**W**E DIDN'T go back to feeling depressed again, either. The funny things about Hidden Valley stopped bothering us, and we all enjoyed ourselves. We had fresh eggs and milk so rich you could hardly drink it and lettuce and peas and tomatoes and everything. It was a dry year, but we had plenty of water for irrigation. We lived off the fat of the land; you'd have to have a hundred dollars a week to live like that in the city.

Donnie liked school (he walked about a mile to the school bus) better than he had in the city because the kids were more friendly, and mom got a big bang out of taking care of the cow and the chickens. I was outside all day long, working in the garden, and I got a fine tan and put on some weight. Mom said I never looked so well. She went into town in the jalopy twice a month to get me books from the county library, and I had all kinds of interesting things to read.

The only thing that bothered me—and it didn't really *bother* me, at that—was that I couldn't contact any other hams with my station. I never got a single signal from anyone. I don't know what the trouble was, really—what it looked like was that radio waves couldn't get into or out of the valley. I did everything I could to soup up my equipment. I had mom get me a dozen books from the county library, and I stayed up half the night studying them. I tore my equipment down and built it up again eight or ten times, and put in all sorts of fancy stuff. Nothing helped.

I might as well have held a rock to my ear and listened to it.

But outside of that, as I say, I thought Hidden Valley was wonderful. I was glad mom had made me and Donnie go there. Everything was doing fine, until Donnie fell in the cave.

It happened when he went out after lunch to hunt his kitten—it was Saturday—and he didn't come back and he didn't come back. At last mom, getting worried, sent me out to look for him.

I went to all the usual places first, and then, not finding him, went farther away. At last, high up on a hillside, I found a big, fresh-looking hole. It was about five feet across, and from the look of the grass on the edges, the earth had just recently caved in. It seemed to be six or seven feet deep. Could Donnie be down in there? If there's a hole to fall in, a kid will fall in it.

I put my ear over the edge and listened. I couldn't see anything when I looked. After a moment I heard a sound like sobbing, pretty much muffled.

"Donnie!" I yelled. "Oh, Donnie!" There wasn't any answer, but the sobbing seemed to get louder. I figured if he was down there that he was either hurt or too scared to answer my call.

I hobbled back to the house as quick as I could and got a stepladder. I didn't tell mom—no use in worrying her any more. I managed to get the ladder to the hole and down inside. Then I went down myself. I've got lots of strength in my arms.

Donnie wasn't at the bottom. Some light was coming in at the top, and I could see that the cave went on sloping down. I listened carefully and heard the crying again.

The slope was pretty steep, about twenty degrees. I went forward carefully, feeling my way along the side and listening. Everything was as dark as the inside of a cow. Now and then I'd yell Donnie's name.

The crying got louder. It did sound like Donnie's voice. Pretty soon I heard a faint "Eddie!" from ahead. And almost at the same moment I saw a faint gleam.

When I got up to it, Donnie was there. I could just make him out silhouetted against the dim yellowish glow. When I said his name this time, he gulped and swallowed. He crawled up to me as quick as he could and threw his arms around my legs.

"Ooooh, Eddie," he said, "I'm so glad you came! I fell in and hurt myself. I didn't know how to get out. I crawled away down here. I've been awful scared."

I put my arms around him and patted him. I certainly was glad to see him. But my attention wasn't all on him. Part of it was fixed on the egg.

It wasn't really an egg, of course. Even at the time I knew that. But it looked like a reptile's egg, somehow, a huge big egg. It was about the size of a cardboard packing box, oval shaped, and it seemed to be covered over with a tough and yet gelatinous skin. It glowed faintly with a pale orange light, as if it were translucent and the light were coming through it from behind. Shadows moved slowly inside.

Donnie was holding onto my legs so tightly I was afraid he'd stop the circulation. I could feel his heart pounding against me, and when I patted him his face was wet with tears. "I'm awful glad you came, Eddie," he said again. "You

know that ol' egg there? It's been making me see all sorts of things. I was awful scared."

Donnie never lies. "It's all right now, kid," I said, looking at the egg. "We won't let it show you any more bad things."

"Oh, they weren't bad!" Donnie drew away from me. "The egg's bad, but the things weren't! They were awful nice."

**I** KNEW I ought to get him out, but I was curious. I was so curious I couldn't stand it. I said, "What kind of things, Quack-quack?" (That's his pet name, because his name is Donald.)

"Oh . . ." Donnie's voice was dreamy. His heart beat was calming down. "Books and toys and candy. A great big Erector set. A toy farm and fire truck and a cowboy suit. And ice cream—I wish you could have some of the ice cream, Eddie. I had sodas and malteds and Eskimo bars and cokes. Oh, and I won first prize in the spelling contest. Mom was awful glad."

"You mean—the egg let you have all these things?" I asked, feeling dazed.

"Naw." Donnie's tone held disgust. "But I could have 'em, all that and a lot more, if I'd do what the egg wanted."

"Oh."

"But I wouldn't do it." Donnie's voice was virtuous. "I said no to 'em. That egg's bad."

"What did the egg want you to do?"

## Warning! Act fast on PIN-WORMS



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So if you suspect Pin-Worms, act fast! Get P-W from your druggist and simply follow the directions.

**P-W® Tablets for Pin-Worms**



"Ah, they wouldn't tell me." Donnie's tone was full of antagonism. "They never did say. C'm on, let's get out of here. You help me. I don't like it here."

I didn't answer. I didn't move. I couldn't. The egg . . . was showing me things.

What sort of things? The things I wanted most, just as it had with Donnie. Things I wanted so much I wouldn't even admit to wanting them. I saw myself healthy and normal and strong, with a straight back and powerful limbs. I was going to college, I was captain of the football team. I made the touchdown that won the big game. I was graduated with honors while mom and my girl friend—such a pretty, jolly girl—looked on, their faces bright with pride. I got an important research job in radio. And so on—foolish ambitions, impossible hopes. Crazy dreams.

But they weren't dreams when the egg was showing them to me. They were real, they weren't something I had to hide or laugh at any longer. And all the time a voice inside my brain was saying. "You can have this. You can have all this."

"Won't you help us, won't you please help us? We're harmless, we're trapped and hurt. We came here from our own place to colonize, and we can't get out and we can't get back."

"It would be easy for you to help us. And we'll be grateful. We'll give you all you saw. And more. All you have to do . . ."

I took a step forward. Of course I wanted what they had shown me. I wanted it very much. And besides I felt sorry for the things, the harmless things, imprisoned in the egg. I've known what it is to feel helpless and trapped.

Donnie was beating on my thigh with his fists and screaming. I tried to shake him off so I could go on listening to the other voice. He hung on, pummeling me, and finally, in desperation, grabbed at my hand and bit it hard with his sharp

little teeth. "Eddie, Eddie, Eddie! Come out of it, please come out of it!"

That roused me. I looked at him, dazed and resentful. Why wouldn't he let me listen so I could help the poor things in the egg? "Be quiet, Quack-quack," I mumbled to him.

"You gotta listen, Eddie! Don't let them get you! 'Member what happened to Uncle Albert? 'Member how we felt when we first came to the farm?"

The words penetrated. My normal caution was waking up. "But they say they don't mean us any harm," I argued weakly. I was talking to Donnie just like he was grown-up.

"Aw, they're big liars. They can't help hurting us. It's something they put into the air, like, by just being alive. They can stop it for a while, if they try hard. But that's the way they really are. Like poison oak, or a rattlesnake. 'Sides, I think they like it. They like being the way they are."

Poison oak and rattlers, I translated to myself, aren't consciously evil. They don't will their nature. But it's their nature to be poisonous. If Donnie was right in thinking that the things in the egg gave out, as a part of their metabolism, a vibration which was hostile to human life . . . Uncle Albert had committed suicide by blowing himself up with dynamite.

"We'd better get rid of the egg, Quack-quack," I said.

"Yes, Eddie."

I helped him up the shaft to the mouth of the cave. He'd sprained his ankle. On the way I asked, "What are the things in the egg like, Donnie?" I had an idea, but I wanted to check it with him. I felt his young mind and senses were keener and more reliable in this than mine.

"Like radio. Or 'lectricity."

"Where did they come from?"

"Another—not like where we live. Everything's different. It's not like here. It's right here beside us. An' it's a long way off."

I nodded. I helped him up the ladder and left him sitting on the hillside. Then I went back to the house for my .22 and a can of kerosene.

Donnie watched me anxiously as I went down with them. I don't mind admitting I was pretty nervous myself.

A .22 isn't an elephant gun. Still, at a two-foot range it ought to have some penetrating power. It didn't. The bullets just bounced off from the side of the egg. I could hear them spitting against the walls of the cave. I used three clips before I gave up.

That left the kerosene. There hadn't been any more attempts to show me pictures or bring me around. In a silence that seemed bitterly hostile I poured kerosene all over the egg. I used plenty. Then I stood back and tossed a match at it.

Heat boiled up. It got so hot I retreated nearly to where Donnie had fallen in. But when it cooled off enough so that I could go back, I found the egg sitting there as good as new. There wasn't even any soot on it.

I was beaten. I couldn't think of anything more to do. I went up the ladder with the empty kerosene can and my gun. Donnie seemed to know I'd failed. He was crying when I came up to him. "Don't tell mom," I said, and he nodded dutifully.

Would the egg let it go at that? I didn't think so. After supper I said to mom, "You know, sometimes I think it would be nice to go back to the city for a while."

She looked at me as if she couldn't believe her ears. "Are you crazy, Eddie? We never had it so good before." Her eyes narrowed and she began to get worried. "What's the matter, honey? Aren't you feeling well?"

I couldn't tell her. I knew she'd believe me; that was just the trouble. If she knew there was a chance I could be cured, be made healthy and strong the way she wanted me to be, she'd make a dicker

with the things in the egg come hell or high water. It wouldn't make any difference to her whether they were good or bad, if she thought they could help me. Mom's like that.

"Oh, I feel fine," I said as heartily as I could. "It was just an idea. How's for seconds on the strawberry shortcake? It's even better than usual, mom."

Her face relaxed. But I didn't sleep much that night.

THE BREAKFAST mom cooked next morning was punk. I wasn't hungry, but I couldn't help noticing. The toast was burnt, the eggs were leathery and cold, the coffee was the color of tea. There was even a fly in the pitcher of orange juice. I thought she must be worried about Donnie. I had bandaged his foot according to the picture in the first aid book, but the ankle had swelled up like a balloon, and it looked sore and bad.

After breakfast mom said, "Eddie, you seem worn out. I think carrying Donnie so far was bad for you. I don't want you to do any work today. You just sit around and rest."

"I don't feel like resting," I objected.

"Well—" Her face brightened. "I know," she said, sounding pleased. "Why don't you see what you can get on your radio set? The cord's long enough you could take it out on the side porch and be out in the fresh air. It's been a long time since you worked with it. Maybe you could get some of the stations you used to get."

She sounded so pleased with herself for having thought of the radio that I didn't have the heart to argue with her. She helped me move the table and the equipment outside and I sat down and began to fiddle with it. It was nice and cool out on the porch.

I didn't get any signals, of course. Pretty soon Donnie came limping out. He

was supposed to stay on the couch in the living room, but it's hard for a kid to keep still.

"What's the matter, Donnie?" I asked, looking at him. He was frowning, and his face was puckered-up and serious. "Foot hurt?"

"Oh, some . . . But Eddie . . . you know that old egg?"

I picked up my headphones and turned them a bit. "Um," I said.

"Well, I don't think you shoulda built that fire around it. It was a bad thing to do."

I put the headphones down. I wanted to tell Donnie to shut up and not bother me; I know that was because I didn't like what he was saying. "Why was it bad?" I asked.

"Because it stirred the things in the egg up. I kin feel it. It's like you have a station with more juice, you can get farther. The fire gave them more juice."

I didn't know what to say. I figured he was right, and I felt scared. After a minute I made myself laugh. "Nothing to worry about, Quack-quack," I said. "We can lick any old egg."

His face relaxed a little. "I guess so," he said. He sat down in the porch swing.

Mom stuck her head around the edge of the door. "Did you get anything on your radio, Eddie?" she asked.

"No," I said a little shortly.

"That's too bad." She went back in the kitchen and hung her apron up, and then she came out on the porch. She was rubbing her forehead with the back of her hand as if her head ached.

To please her, I put on my headphones and twiddled the dials. No dice, of course. Mom frowned. She went around to the other side of the table and stood looking at the wiring, something I'd never seen her do before. "How would it be if you moved this from here to here?" she said. Her voice was a little high.

I leaned over to see what she was point-

ing at. "That would just burn out the tubes."

"Oh," She stood there for a moment. Then her hand darted out and before I could stop her, before I even had any idea what she was up to, she moved the wire she'd been talking about.

"Hey!" I squawked, "stop that!" I said it too late. There was a crackle and a flash and all the tubes burned out. My station was completely dead.

Mom rubbed her forehead and looked at me. "I don't know what made me do that, Eddie," she said apologetically. "It was just like something moved my hand! I'm awfully sorry, son."

"Oh, that's okay," I said. "Don't worry about it. The station wasn't good for anything."

"I know, but . . . My head's been feeling queer all morning. I think it must be the weather. Doesn't the air feel heavy and oppressive to you?"

The air did have a thick, discouraging feel, but I hadn't noticed it before she burned out the radio tubes. I opened my mouth to say something, but before I could say it, Donnie yelled, "Look at Fluffie! She's walking on the air!"

We both jerked around. There Fluffie was, about ten feet up, making motions with her paws as if she were trying to walk. She was mewing a blue streak. Now and then she'd slip down three or four feet and then go up to the former level, just as if a hand had caught at her. Her fur was standing up all over, and her tail was three times its usual size. Finally she went up about twenty feet and then came sailing down in a long curve. She landed on the ground with a thump. And that was the beginning of all the phenomena.

It wasn't so much that we felt depressed at first, though we certainly did. But we could stand it; the depression wasn't as bad as it had been when we first came to Hidden Valley. I guess that was because

the things in the egg were more spread out now. Whether that was the reason or not, most of the phenomena were physical.

You could hardly get into the living room. It was like pushing your way through big wet bladders to go into it. If you sat on the sofa you had a sense of being crowded and pushed, and pretty soon you'd find yourself down at the far end of it, squeezed into a corner. When mom struck matches to make a fire for lunch, the matches were twitched out of her hand and went sailing around the room. We had to eat cold things; she was afraid of burning down the place.

At first mom tried to pretend there was nothing wrong; after all, you couldn't see anything. But I went out in the kitchen at supper time and found her crying quietly. She said it was because she'd been trying to cut bread for sandwiches and the knife in her hand kept rising up toward her throat. I knew that if mom was crying it had been pretty bad. So I told her about the egg in the cave and all that.

"They're out of the egg now," she said unhappily when I had finished. "My burning out the tubes this morning let them out. We've got to go back to the city, Eddie. It's the only thing to do."

"And leave them loose?" I said sharply. "We can't do that. If it was just a case of deserting the valley and having them stay here, it would be all right. But they won't stay here. They came to earth to colonize. That means they'll increase and spread out.

"Remember how it was when we came here? Remember how we felt? Suppose it was like that over most of the earth!"

Mom shook her head till her gray curls bobbed. "This can't be real, Eddie," she said in a sort of wail. "We must be having hallucinations or something. I keep telling myself, this can't be real."

Donnie, outside, gave a sudden horrible shriek. Mom turned as white as a ghost.

Then she darted out, with me after her.

Donnie was standing over Fluffie's body, crying with rage. He was so mad, and so miserable, he could hardly talk. "They killed her! They killed her!" he said at last. "She was way up in the air and they pushed her down hard and she squashed when she hit the ground. She's all mashed flat!"

There wasn't anything to say. I left mom to try to comfort Donnie, and went off by myself to try to think.

I didn't get anywhere with my thinking. How do you fight anything you can't see, or understand? The things from the egg were immaterial, but could produce material phenomena; Donnie had said they were like electricity or radio. Even if that were true, how did it help? I thought up a dozen fragmentary schemes, each with some major flaw, for getting rid of them, and in the end I had to give up.

None of us went to bed that night. We stayed up in the kitchen huddled together for comfort and protection, while the house went crazy around us. The things that happened were ridiculous and horrible. They made you feel mentally outraged. It was like being lowered down into a well filled with craziness.

**A**BOUT three o'clock the light in the kitchen went slowly out. The house calmed down and everything got quiet. I guess the things from the egg had revenged themselves on us enough for having tried to get rid of them, and now they were going about their own business, perhaps beginning to increase. Because from then on the feeling of depression got worse. It was worse than it had ever been before.

It seemed like years and years until four o'clock. I sat there in the dark holding mom and Donnie's hands and wondering how much longer I could stand it. I had a vision of life then that people in asylums must have, an expanse filled with

unbearable horror and pain and misery.

By the time it was getting light I couldn't stand it any longer. There was a way out; I didn't have to go on seeing Hell opening in front of me. I pulled my hands from mom's and Donnie's and stood up. I knew where Uncle Albert had kept the dynamite. I was going to kill myself.

Donnie's eyes opened and he looked at me. I'd known he wasn't asleep. "Don't do it, Eddie," he said in a thread of a voice. "It'll only give them more juice."

Part of my mind knew dimly what he meant. The things from the egg weren't driving me to suicide deliberately; they didn't care enough about me for that. But my death—or any human's death—would be a nice little event, a tidbit, for them. Life is electrical. My death would release a little juice.

It didn't matter, it wasn't important. I knew what I was going to do.

Mom hadn't moved or looked at me. Her face was drawn and gray and blotched. I knew somehow that what she was enduring was worse than what I had endured. Her vision was darker than mine had been. She was too deep in it to be able to think or speak or move.

The dynamite was in a box in the shed. I hunted around until I found the detonator and the fuse. I stuffed the waxy, candle-like sticks inside the waistband of my trousers and picked up the other things. I was going to kill myself, but part of me felt a certain compunction at the thought of blowing mom and Donnie up. I went outside and began to walk uphill.

The sun was coming up in a blaze of red and gold and there was a soft little breeze. I could smell wood smoke a long way off. It was going to be a fine day. I looked around me critically for a good place to blow myself up.

They say suicides are often very particular; I know I was. This spot was too open and that one too enclosed; there was too much grass here and not quite

enough at the other place. It wasn't that I had cold feet. I hadn't. But I wanted everything to go off smoothly and well, without any hitches or fuss. I kept wandering around and looking and pretty soon, without realizing it, I was near the hillside with the cave.

For a moment I thought of going down in the cave to do what I had to do. I decided against it. The explosion, in that confined space, might blow the whole valley up. I moved on. And suddenly I felt a tug at my mind.

It wasn't all around like the feeling of depression was, something that seemed to be broadcast generally into the air. And it wasn't like the voice inside my head I'd heard in the cave. The best way I can express the feeling is by saying that it was like walking past a furnace with your eyes shut.

I hesitated. I was still feeling suicidal; I never wavered in that. But I felt a faint curiosity and something a lot fainter that you might call, if you exaggerated, the first beginnings of hope.

I went to the mouth of the cave and let myself down through the opening.

The egg when I reached it, was different from the way I remembered it. It was bigger and the edges were misty. But the chief difference was that it was rotating around its long axis at a really fancy rate of speed. It reminded me of the rotation of a generator. The sensation I felt was coming out from it.

Watching the thing's luminous, mazy whirling, I got the idea that it and the things which had come out of it represented opposite poles. It was as alive as they were, though in an opposite way, and its motion provided the energy for them to operate.

I pulled the sticks of dynamite out of my belt and began setting them up. There really wasn't much danger of blowing up the valley, and as long as I was going to do away with myself, I might as well



take the egg with me, or try to. That was the way I looked at it.

No attempt was made to stop me. This may have been because the things from the egg weren't interested in human beings, except spasmodically, but I think it more likely was because they, being polar opposites from the egg, had to keep their distance from it. Anyhow, I got my connections made without interference. I stood back a foot or two.

I closed the switch.

The next thing I knew, my head was on mom's lap. She was shaking me desperately by the shoulders and crying something about fire.

Now, I don't see how I could have been responsible for the fire. The earthquake, possibly. Apparently when the dynamite exploded the egg tried to absorb the energy. (That's why I wasn't hurt more.) It got an overload. And the overload, somehow, blew it clean out of our space. I got a glimpse of the space it was blown into, I think, just before my head hit the rock. But anyhow, a thing like that might possibly have caused an earthquake. All the country around Hidden Valley is over a fault.

Anyhow, there'd been earthquakes, several of them. Mom and Donnie had gone out hunting me as soon as the worst shocks were over, and found me lying at the mouth of the cave. They got me up somehow; I don't weigh much. Mom was nearly crazy with worry because I was still unconscious. For the last two hours or so she'd been smelling the smoke and hearing the crackling of the fire.

Some camper up in the mountains, I guess, started it. It was an awfully dry year. Anyhow, by the time I was conscious and on my feet again it was too late to think about running. We didn't even have time to grab a suitcase. Mom and Donnie and I went down the flume.

That was some trip. When we got to Portsmouth, we found the whole town

ready to pick up and leave, the fire was that close. They got it out in time, though. And then we found out that we were refugees.

There were pieces about the three of us in the city papers, with scareheads and everything. The photographers took pictures of all of us, even me, and they tried to make out we were heroes because we'd gone down the flume and hadn't got burnt up in the fire. That was a lot of foolishness; there isn't anything heroic in saving your own life. And mom hated those pictures. She said they made her look like she was in her seventies and heading for the grave.

One of the papers took up a collection for us, and we got a couple of hundred dollars out of it. It was a big help to us, because all we had in the world was the clothes we were standing in. After all, though, we hadn't really expected to be alive. And we'd got rid of the things from the egg.

As mom says, we have a lot to be thankful for.

I could be more thankful, though, if I didn't have Ischeenar. I've tried and tried to figure out why he didn't die when the rest of the things did, when the egg was blown into another space. The only thing I can think of is that maybe, having been born here on earth, he's different from the rest of them. Anyhow, he's here with us. I've managed to keep mom from finding out, but as I say, he lives in my big toe.

Sometimes I feel almost sorry for him. He's little and helpless, and alone in a big and hostile world. He's different from everything around him. Like us, he's a refugee.

But I wish I could get rid of him. He's not so bad now while he's young. He's really not dangerous. But I wish to *God* I could get rid of him.

He's going to be a stinker when he grows up.

# APPOINTMENT FOR TOMORROW

*His death was a thin red line on a chart . . . not a gun, not poison, but simply the cold, errorless science of the doomsday men. And even as he prepared to fight it, Larkin knew grimly that—for him—there was no escape in this world!*

HE HAD heard the hush, the sudden silence, in the large outer office and he had frowned, wondering at the cause. For the past year he had been working with an increasing sense of urgency, and on the backing of his loyal staff depended much of his efficiency. And so the silence annoyed him.

His secretary, Martha Hood, came into his office, closed the door behind her. She said, hesitantly, "There—are some men to see you, Mr. Larkin."

This was no example of Miss Hood's usual crisp efficiency.

With irritation firmly under check, he said evenly, "Why didn't you use the intercom? And who are these men?"

Miss Hood looked very strange. Her face was pale. Her lips trembled. Suddenly he knew the answer.

He had been checking a column of figures. The long yellow pencil snapped in his fingers and he looked at the broken piece dully as it rolled across the desk, dropped to the floor with a tiny clatter. "So soon!" he said softly. "So soon."

Her voice was thick with tears. "Mr. Larkin, I . . ."

"Send them in, Miss Hood."

She turned and left the office and he saw that, tear-blinded, she missed the door handle the first time.

There were three of them. The last one carried a thick portfolio. They wore the traditional dull gray of the Future Bureau, the gray with crimson piping that had been caricatured so often in the public press—a grim form of humor.

"Mr. Samuel Larkin?" the first one asked. Traditional and pointless question.

He nodded.

They stood in front of his big desk. "As field agents of the Future Bureau, Mr. Larkin, it is our unpleasant duty to advise you that—"

"Skip the standard routine," Samuel Larkin said heavily. "Are you sure of your charts?"

The spokesman said, "We would hardly take this step unless all the figures had been checked many times. Over a year ago, according to our records, you were sent Form 89 A, advising you of a potential approaching danger period in your personal probability chart, and suggesting the standard series of habit and routine

# By JOHN D. MacDONALD

The deep-toned bell began to toll, a heavy cadence, a sound of dull warning.



alterations to eliminate that danger. You made no such alterations."

"My work at that time was too important," Larkin said.

"Six months ago we substantiated our first prognosis and advised you in Form 89 B that only major and thorough alterations would have a chance of altering the extrapolation of your master chart."

"It would have meant giving up my work," Larkin said. "And I consider my work important."

For the first time the cold official manner was dropped. "Evidently," the spokesman said drily. "Get out the charts, Rogers."

The man opened the portfolio, spread the neat master chart on Larkin's desk. The spokesman said, "You will note the cyclical tendency of the past, your recurring periods of personal danger and serious illness. You will note that the present time is high on the curve of the extrapolated cycle."

Rogers took a transparent overlay, fitted it onto the master chart. "This overlay," said the spokesman, "shows the cyclical characteristics of your personality, the degree of emotional flux. Note that the line subtends the accident line very shortly in the future. This next overlay is over-all mortality and accident factors in your specific profession. Again there is subtending of the line in the immediate future. This last sheet is the calculation wherein there has been set up your personal mortality factor, multiplied by the standard indices. You will note that the final figure is exceptionally high."

Larkin studied the charts, then pushed them across the desk. He said, "What chance have I got?"

"We are always asked that question, Mr. Larkin, even by men whose technical training is equivalent to yours. The answer is, of course, none."

Larkin's lips felt numbed. He asked softly, "How much time have I got?"

"Until tomorrow."

He felt the dull anger. "Why not more time? Why not more?"

"You received the warning thirty days ago. You are fortunate to have an index of stability sufficiently high so that we can give you the exact day. Others do not receive this last notice. The law requires me to ask you if your affairs are in order."

"They are," Samuel Larkin said.

"Are there any questions?"

"I have the right to elect the usual—alternative?"

"Everyone has that right, Mr. Larkin. No more questions?"

The three trooped out. The last one closed the door behind him. Samuel Larkin sat at his desk, more alone than he had ever been in his life. Mechanically he picked up the papers on his desk, aligned the edges, put them in the desk basket.

The usual sounds from the outer office were subdued.

Larkin was a big man. His shoulders were heavy and there was a fullness under his chin, but he had kept his waistline down, kept his big body hard throughout the years of executive work. He was forty-seven years old, his dark hair liberally touched with gray at the temples.

Martha Hood came in timidly and he saw on her sensitive face an uncertainty, a tiny flicker of hope. "Did they—"

"It's true, Miss Hood," he said deliberately.

She gave a small stifled cry, turned her back to him. He went quickly around the desk, put his hands on her shoulders and turned her around. As he did so he realized wryly that it was the first time in the seven years she had worked for him that he had ever touched her. She had reported to him on her twenty-second birthday, selected from the stenographic pool on the basis of intelligence, beauty and breeding.

SHE DID not look up at him. He put his big knuckles gently under her soft chin, lifted her face. She looked at him with streaming eyes. "It isn't fair!" she said. "It isn't fair!"

"Fate isn't a very fair thing, my dear. Come now. There's a lot to do. Last-minute things." His voice choked strangely on the last phrase.

She dried her eyes, went and got her notebook.

It was automatic. His subconscious mind had been planning what he would do. First he dictated a note to Farnum who was in London on a business trip. He told Farnum that from now on the venture was in his hands, that he had been lucky to have as effective and devoted an assistant as Farnum, and that the Board of Directors, in secret meeting three weeks before, had approved Farnum as his successor. He appended a power of attorney to facilitate Farnum's cleaning up any last details.

He also appended a memorandum to Farnum in outline form, suggesting the methods of handling certain pending business matters.

Martha Hood took the dictation, and once he saw a tear drop onto the sheet as she wrote.

The chair creaked as he leaned back. "Miss Hood, get my personal folder out of the safe file. I do not wish to be disturbed for the rest of the afternoon. Get me some writing paper and envelopes, please. Tell the rest of the staff that I will expect to see them, one at a time, at closing time."

She said, "That will be—hard for you, Mr. Larkin."

"I want to see each one of them one more time, Miss Hood."

She brought back the items he had requested. He read over his will. For the first time in his life he was glad that his invalid wife had died six years before. He remembered how he had debated

whether or not to tell her how long the Future Bureau gave her to live. And he had decided against it, had made her last days as happy as he could possibly make them. There had been, of course, no alternative for her.

He thought of his son, in school a thousand miles away, as he read over the will. It was adequate. There would be a generous allowance until school was finished, then enough for a year of travel. The rest of the estate would then be paid in a lump sum. He wrote the letter quickly in his large, sprawling hand, avoiding sticky sentiment, saying, at the end of the letter, that he was glad to have had such a son. Glad and proud.

He carried current funds in a checking account. He examined the balance, then made out nine checks to the nine oldest employees, grading them in order of years of service. He made out a larger check to Miss Hood, attached a note asking her to see that the employees received any portion she thought proper.

After that, he sealed the envelopes. There was a half hour remaining in which to write notes to a few good friends, friends who had outlasted the years.

At five Miss Hood opened the door and asked, "Are you ready, Mr. Larkin?"

He nodded and they came in, one at a time. He stood in front of his desk and shook hands with each of them. They mumbled the proper phrases, memorized a few moments before they had entered his office. He thanked each one of them for their work and their loyalty.

After the last one had gone he sat behind his desk once more. He sat without moving, and the lowering sun cast his gigantic shadow on the far wall. The shadow faded and the office was filled with the gray-pink glow of dusk. The glow faded and the office furniture turned to dark shadows in the room. He sat with his hands knotted on the desk top and thought of the good years. He reviewed

the decision he had made when he received the first form letter from the Future Bureau. It was still a good decision. To have stepped out at that time would have meant work undone, work that related directly to the happiness of thousands. At that time Farnum wasn't well enough trained to take over. If he had made an error, it had been that. He had made himself too indispensable to the operations.

But knowing the decision was just did nothing to eliminate the fear that seemed to crouch like a patient beast in the deeper shadows in the corners of the big office.

The lights of the city were on and a distant display sign made a dim pulsing of blue against the office ceiling, like the slow beat of an eternal heart.

The door opened and he blinked against the light, seeing the silhouette of Miss Hood in the doorway. He had almost forgotten her. It was as though, in the fresh knowledge of what had happened to him, he was moving further away from every human contact.

"Mr. Larkin, you shouldn't sit here in the dark."

"Come and sit with me, Martha," he said.

She shut the door against the light and came over to the desk. She sat in the chair beside the desk, in the place where, for seven years, she had taken his dictation, cool and efficient.

He was glad that she knew the value of silence. And suddenly she was dearer to him than any of those to whom he had written the notes. As dear as his son.

Her hand was a moving paleness in the gloom. She reached out and placed her hand over his. She squeezed hard.

He laughed then. A small laugh, hoarse and embarrassed. He said, "This is almost completely ridiculous, Martha. You've been here every day, and yet I never knew. You're so much younger than I. Now it's as if I'm meeting you for the first time.

And finding suddenly that I love you."

"I hoped you'd say that, Sam," she said. "It's been one-sided for so long."

"But I'm so much older than—"

"I don't feel that way. I never have. Not from the first day."

He leaned toward her, found her mouth in the darkness, and kissed her. It was not a kiss of promise, for he had no future. It was, in a sense, a dedication and an acknowledgment. He could smell the fragrance of her hair.

"So much wasted time," he said heavily.

Her fingers touched his lips. "Don't say that, Sam. Don't say it. It has been good. Every minute of it. You see, I knew, even if you didn't."

He sat in the darkness and held her smooth hand and felt once again as he had when he was small, when the darkness was peopled with things of horror and fear came with the night.

They sat together and heard the distant small sounds of the city. They sat with a heightened consciousness of each other.

He left her without quite daring to go through the formality of saying good-by. He left her inside the office and he shut the door, leaned weakly against it, knowing that not only was the closed office door a symbol of twenty years of his work, but that the girl beyond the closed door was a symbol of wasted years, of tenderness that could have been his.

Hearing the small, resigned sound of her weeping, he straightened his heavy shoulders, walked with determined tread through the outer office, down the corridor.

THE CITY was alive with those who tasted the night, alive with the laughter of women, the brittle sound of ice in tall glasses, the raw molten brass of the trumpet note, held long beyond belief. The tires made soft whispers on the silken asphalt and, on a cor-

ner, a boy held a girl in the crook of his arm and laughed down into her upraised face.

Samuel Larkin walked heavily down through the city, and though he looked neither to right nor left, he absorbed the sounds of the city, the life of the city, and it was an acid taste in his heart. He felt jealousy, and often it was necessary to think back over the years, the good years, deriving from those thoughts a certain stolid satisfaction. He remembered the look on Thomason's face when Thomason heard from the Future Bureau what fate held in store for Thomason's twin daughters. Yes, he had led a full life and a good life, here on Earth.

He walked down to the area where he was born. The tenements were gone, of course, and where they stood, tall apartment towers held their white shoulders against the silhouette of the distant stars. He stood alone, his big hands shoved deep in his pockets. He thought of the distant years, of the dreams and the hopes.

Walking the night streets of the city, he forgot time. The after-theater crowd swarmed the streets, vanished quickly away. The bars had the sultry brazen sound of late hours. On one street a piano chord was endlessly repeated, drumming into the blood like the beat of ancient drums of war. Or death.

It was his last night on Earth.

He walked without haste, his heels striking the pavement in heavy stolid rhythm, a tall man, heavy through the shoulders, head slightly bent, walking deep in thought, deep in memory.

At the first promise of dawn, the first gray of the east, he stood at the river bank. The running lights of the tugs looked watery and pale in the new promise of day. The river ran sure and swift and deep. He lit a cigarette and sat on an iron bench and watched the deepening color in the east.

When it was time, he walked back out

to the boulevard, hailed a cruising cab, settled back in the seat and said, "Space Three."

The cabby gave him a quick look, half shrugged, spun the cab in a wide U turn and went back out the boulevard. The canyons of the streets were still cloaked in night, waiting for the red touch of dawn. A milk horse clopped slowly across the boulevard, unexcited by the wide sweep of the cab around it.

"Farz I can go, Doc," the driver said as he pulled up to the gates.

From habit, Larkin glanced at the meter. Then he smiled wryly, gave the driver all the money he had.

The driver said, "Look, Doc, I don't—" He paused. "I get it. Thanks, Doc. Uh—best of luck."

Larkin walked from the gate to the administration building. The waiting room was clotted with frightened people. When his turn came he went to the desk.

The clerk leafed the register. "Larkin, Samuel B. Right here. Area Eight, Ship CV22, Room Thirty-eight. Got that?"

Larkin nodded.

At Area Eight he walked along the line until he found CV22. The weary attendant at the top of the portable ramp checked the list, made a mark opposite his name. The attendant was a young freckled man with buck teeth and a faint odor of acid perspiration.

He yawned and said, "Lot of suckers still out there in town pretending they can hide."

"Which way is my room?" Larkin asked.

The attendant said, "They ought to know better. You can't beat the percentage. This is the only way out of it."

With sudden fury Larkin grabbed the young man's shoulder, spun him around. "I don't want philosophy. I want to find my room."

"Don't get in a sweat, Pop. Right down that corridor and second turn to your



left. Room thirty-eight'll be on the right-hand side."

As Larkin walked away the attendant called, "Charlie Bliss'll check you into the room, Pop."

There was no sign of Bliss. Samuel Larkin went down to his room, stripped off his coat, lay at full length on the bunk. He fingered the wide web straps with idle curiosity. He left the door to the tiny room open.

It must have been an hour later when Bliss came in, a clerical-looking man who carried a thick pad of forms on a clip board.

"Mmmm. Thirty-eight," he said. "Larkin? Got to rush this, mister. Lots of last-minute detail this time. Read this form and sign it."

Samuel Larkin sat on the edge of his bunk and skimmed through the form. "Having been advised by the Future Bureau . . . realizing that death on Earth is the only other possible outcome, agree to participate as a passenger and colonist on an experimental space voyage to a destination to be later designated by the ship's crew . . . untold hardship . . . but such a complete alteration of all earthly variables that it is the only chance of escaping the death which has been postulated as inevitable should the undersigned remain on Earth . . . no possibility of return to Earth . . . should be understood by all concerned . . ."

He signed it quickly. At the man's request he stood up, raised his right hand, repeated the oath that deprived him of free will, that committed him to the long years of voyage, the hardship of colonization, that made him subject to the orders of ColBu, even though those orders meant death.

Bliss said, "Okay, you can sit down." He glanced at his watch. "Blowoff in eight minutes. I got to get off this tub. Strap yourself into the bunk. After acceleration slows to two G's, the medic

will come and check you and the exec will give you your duties. I got to go check on a freevee. We don't get many of them."

For a moment Larkin forgot his personal torment. He knew the ColBu slang. A freevee was a volunteer of free will, one who elected to board one of the ships of the doomed, to join those who left Earth only because in staying they would guarantee the death that had been statistically ascertained.

As Bliss went out the door Larkin heard him grumble, "Waste of talent, shooting a dish like that into space."

And Sam Larkin suspected. He reached the door in time to see Bliss, far down the corridor, turn into another room.

He hurried after Bliss, stood in the doorway, his heart thudding, and saw Martha Hood, pale and hollow-eyed, sign her name on the bottom of the form.

"You can't, Martha!" he said hoarsely. "You can't do it!"

She looked up at him and her eyes were glowing. "Why not, Sam?"

"You have everything here on Earth to live for. A normal life, Martha. A good life."

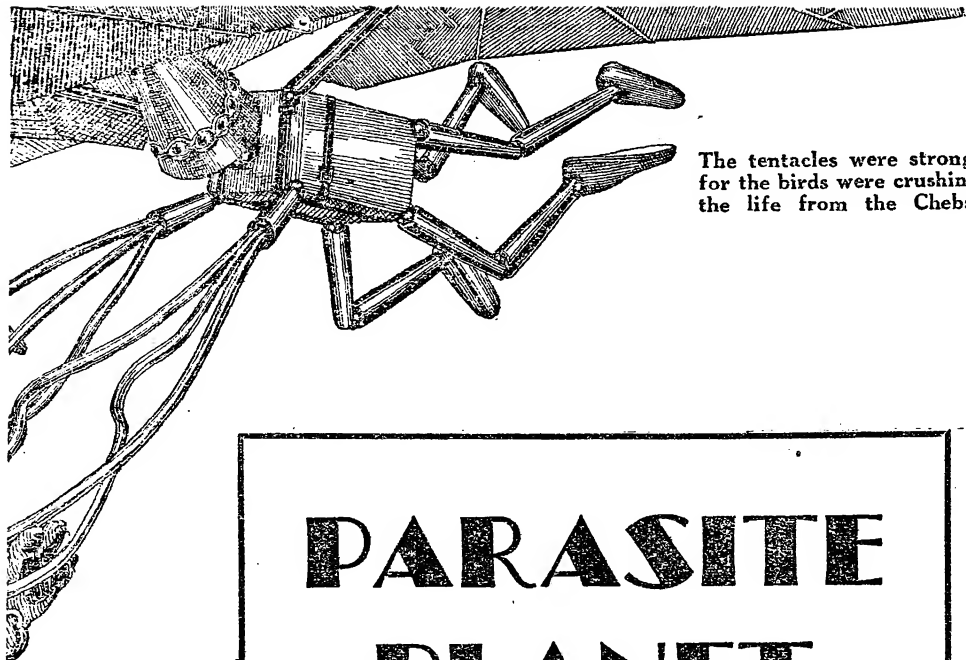
She smiled, as though humoring a child. "With you gone, Sam, there wouldn't be anything left here for me. I decided after you left me in the office."

Larkin turned to Bliss. "Take her off this ship!"

Bliss glared. "Maybe you could push people around yesterday, mister. But you're signed on and you take orders. So does this girl. Get back to your room."

Martha said, "I'll see you later, darling."

The deep-toned bell began to toll, a heavy cadence, a sound of dull warning. Like a man in a dream Sam Larkin went back to his room. He tightened the heavy web straps. He lay on his back, looking toward the invisible stars. And suddenly his heart was full of peace—and a strange new hope.



The tentacles were strong,  
for the birds were crushing  
the life from the Chebs.

# PARASITE PLANET



*Helplessly trapped, the machine men heard the ultimatum of the terrible Heolons of Bhem: "Give us back the secret that has been dust these thousand years—or, as living metal statues, adorn our halls throughout all eternity!"*

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Stone Birds

**K**LAEMTEN paused in his flight through the richly verdured foothills of the Mlopts which towered in the blue haze of distance. He heard the shrill screeches of the pursuing Chebs, and he turned in the direction of that sound, the deep-set eyes in his spherical

head searching for them. Klaemten's body was also round, but flattened slightly in front and back. Powerfully muscled legs had given him a good start on the Chebs, but their animal speed and endurance was closing the distance. A pair of tentacles, like snakes, curled gracefully from the



By NEIL R. JONES



sides of his round body, while sharp ears projected from his head to give him an alert and listening appearance.

Escape lay in the mountains, but a desperate despair struck at his heart. He would never make it. He had come far, indeed, on his strength and endurance and had even successfully employed a bit of trickery on the pursuing Chebs. Had he only to reckon with the ignorant animals, he might now be free. But not all the Chebs were ignorant. Many of them, including those pursuing him, were mentally endowed by the master race, the Heolons, for whom Klaemten had lately slaved. Klaemten was an Urgyul, one of the slave race, who not only were slaves of the Heolons but served as food for their great pets, the Chebs. By a secret art of their own, the Heolons gave many of these fearsome carnivores intellects.

Klaemten had been purposely released by his masters so that he might be hunted by the Chebs for their amusement. Moreover—and this was the worst—Klaemten was not the only one who had been condemned. His mate, Eulud, at that moment lay in the crypt at Thoth, the food storehouse for the Chebs.

Klaemten looked longingly at the mountains on the horizon. Safety and security lay in the upper reaches of the high peaks where dwelt a colony of free Urgyuls, one of the few known strongholds of that subjugated race. Neither the Heolons nor the Chebs could stand the thin, cold air of the mountains.

The triumphant screech of the Chebs sounded much closer, and casting one desperate look behind him, Klaemten stumbled on. Reaching the top of a rise, he slumped to the ground helplessly, the screeching of the approaching Chebs ringing a death knell in his ears. The Chebs were impatient and hungry. They had not counted on Klaemten to lead them this far.

Suddenly he saw them. The leader

stopped on the farther rise of ground, two hundred yards off, and waited until two more of the animals came up with him, leaping along on their four legs, graceful and powerful.

The Chebs were long and tigerish, their short fur strangely marked with an intersecting, triangular design of darker color against a brownish gray. They were armed with sharp fangs and claws with which to rend him to pieces. There were but three of them, but that was enough.

They spread out to surround him. Klaemten recognized the move and knew that this was the beginning of the end. He gathered rocks hastily, ready to fight.

The attack of the Chebs commenced. One after another dove at him ferociously and retired as he pelted it viciously with stones. Had they rushed him at once, he would have been done for, but in this way lay greater sport and a whetted appetite. Klaemten was tiring fast, and he felt a sharp twinge of pain in his legs as the jaws of a Cheb closed upon him momentarily before he could turn from driving off another.

In spite of the fact that his attention was closely drawn by the snarling beasts, he noticed that birds were gathering above, ready to pick his bones when the Chebs had finished with him. The Chebs were now darting at him with greater abandon and with serious intent. The end was near. Even the birds appeared to sense it and dove lower over the fray. Even in his moment of peril, Klaemten realized with a shock that they were much larger than they had any right to be.

Then the Chebs were upon him, and one of them had him down. Above the furry shoulder of the snarling beast, he saw the birds descending, and they were things never before seen in the wildest reaches of Bhém. He felt something hard and cold slide close to him, something which gripped the Cheb securely and flung it off. It was a snakelike tentacle,

not unlike the fleshy part of Klaemten's upper appendages. The tentacle belonged to one of the birds, and as the strange creature pulled the fighting, snarling Cheb off him, Klaemten saw that the oddly-shaped and glistening bird of hard, perfect angles had six of these tentacles and four jointed legs.

There were four of the birds, and three of them were having no difficulty in overcoming the Chebs. The tentacles were strong, for the birds were crushing the life from the Chebs. One of the gargoyle creatures poised a free tentacle momentarily above the head of a Cheb biting ineffectually at a trapped tentacle with snapping, slavering jaws. A bright glow sprang from it, brighter than the glow of fire Klaemten had seen in the laboratories of the Heolons. The ferocious countenance of the Cheb withered rapidly in a burst of flame and smoke. Almost before he could comprehend the fact, the three Chebs were dead.

And now he found himself the subject of solemn contemplation by these four arrivals from the sky. No voices emerged from them. They looked almost as though they were made of the hard rocks taken from the ground near the city of Thoth from which Klaemten had escaped. Their bodies were cube-shaped. Even their wings appeared to be made of melted rock.

As they stalked closer to the Urgyul and regarded him, Klaemten felt a sinking feeling. They had won out over the Chebs. Would they eat him?

"Do not fear us. We have saved you from harm and will do you no injury. We are friendly."

Klaemten was awed. Not a sound had any of them made, yet the words lay strongly impressed on his brain.

"We are talking to you with our thoughts," Klaemten was assured. "We can read your thoughts. Do not be afraid. Calm your mind and think what you

would say to us now. We are listening."

THE STRANGE things which had rescued Klaemten examined the Urgyul with interest from circles of many eyes surrounding the bases of cone-shaped heads. A single eye in each apex appeared to stare straight upward.

"I wish to thank you for saving me from the Chebs," Klaemten told them, and he could not help but mumble the words as well as think them. "What manner of creatures are you who appear sheathed in the hard stones dug out of the ground?"

"We are made up almost entirely of such stones. Only the insides of our heads are substance like your body."

"Where are you from?" Klaemten haltingly framed the question. "You must be demons."

"We are not demons but constructions directed by living brains. Unless an accident should happen to our heads, we can live on forever, never aging, never dying. When a part wears out, we replace it. We come from the far-off stars which you see shining at night. We travel in a ship of space from world to world. We visited your large moon before coming here. We found it to be a nice place to live. Although it has animal life, we found no intelligence there."

This was almost too much for Klaemten to grasp, and these stone creatures seemed even greater than demons. But the friendliness of these creatures was encouraging.

"Where is your ship?"

"We are temporarily stranded here on this world," was the reply. "We had trouble with our ship and had to land. We find that parts of our ship have worn out and must be replaced. We must make them from stones to be found here on this planet. We are thirty-six in number, and many of us have divided up into small groups and flown in search of stones and also to find out what sort of life flourishes

here. It is rare that we find intelligent life on the worlds we visit. We are pleased that we found you and that we were able to save you from the three animals which beset you."

"If you are of stone and heavy, how do you fly?"

"Our wings do not beat the air like those of birds. They are repelled by the world even as all else is attracted by it, and we are able to vary this repulsion, greater or lesser as we choose."

"Are you born in this fashion, or do you harden later?"

"Neither," was the answer. "Long ago, those among us skilled in the art removed each other's brains from their bodies and placed them in the bodies you see. They are not only harder, but better in every way. We never have to sleep, although a strong blow against our heads will daze us and perhaps render us unconscious."

"Then you were all meat and bone once?" queried Klaemten, marveling at these amazing revelations.

"We were," the spokesman of the four admitted. "We come from Zor, a distant world of a far-off sun. Most of us are original Zoromes, though several of us were creatures of other worlds. 12W-62 here is a true Zorome and was once known among his kindred as Bext," said the machine man, waving a tentacle at one of his companions. "6W-438 is also a true Zorome," he added. "454ZQ2 is not a true Zorome but a convert and was once known as Jbf. His brain, like mine, was found adaptable to the coned stone heads. He and three of his brethren, who were three-legged creatures on a planet revolving around a double sun, were made machine men not long after my own introduction into the ranks of the Zoromes."

"And what manner of creature were you?" Klaemten asked. "Did you, too, have three legs?"

"No. I had but two like yourself and

two jointed upper appendages as well," said the machine man. "I was known as Professor Jameson. Now, I am known among my metal companions as 21MM-392."

"And how many of you creatures from that world were there?"

"Only myself. You see, I was the last of my race. My race had vanished many millions of years before the Zoromes reached my dead world in their spaceship."

Klaemten expressed his bewilderment. His simple wits had not quite grasped the facts. At least, there was something missing. The professor supplied it.

"When I died, I had my body placed in a space rocket and shot off the planet and into space where it became a satellite and circled the planet for forty million years until the machine men came and found my rocket. They recalled my brain to life and placed it in one of their machines. You see, I was perfectly preserved by the cold vacuum of space, and my body underwent no decomposition whatever during that immense gulf of time."

Klaemten was staggered and confessed it, but the four machine men gave him little time for contemplation of the startling things he had learned. They probed his mind for all manner of information regarding his world, his people, the Heolons, the Chebs and where they might expect to find the stones necessary for repairing their spaceship.

"You may find them in the mines of Thoth," Klaemten informed the four Zoromes. "The mines lie between here and the city and are deserted at night. They are worked by Urgyul slave labor. I myself once worked there. I shall be glad to take you there."

"Do you know where Eulud, this mate of yours you speak of, is kept?" the professor inquired. "We might be able to fly into the city and rescue her."

"Yes," Klaemten replied. "I know

where she is kept, but she is in a state of unconsciousness nearer death than life. Only the Heolons can bring her back—and then as live food for the Chebs.”

“If we can get her back to the spaceship and our laboratory, we can bring her back to her normal self,” Professor Jameison told him. “But let us examine the mines first of all.”

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Peril of Thoth

FROM Klaemten's descriptions, the machine men knew that the mines contained a large amount of iron, which was always to be found wherever they traveled, even in the meteors which flashed through the seas of space. But the Urgyul assured them that the mines contained other minerals as well.

“Once Eulud is again herself, we shall go and dwell in the mountains with the free ones,” said Klaemten happily.

To avoid detection, the machine men walked on the ground with the Urgyul. The blue sunlight was deepening into an azure twilight as they came to the vicinity of the mines. From afar, too distant to distinguish details, they watched a steady stream of workers leave the mines. Klaemten pointed to the distant figures and told his metal allies that they were for the most part enslaved brethren of his, guarded by the Chebs and a few Heolons. The mentally endowed Chebs, they learned, spoke in strange voices, for speech had also been given them by the Heolons.

They waited until the azure twilight deepened into velvet darkness, a scattered galaxy of stars appearing gradually in order of magnitude. They watched the last of the miners toiling over the low hills to the city of Thoth in the gathering darkness. The glowing lights they carried were strung out over the undulating hori-

zon like a long, twinkling line of illuminated insects crawling out of sight.

“I feel as if we are being watched ourselves,” said 12W-62. “From somewhere back in the direction from which we came.”

“I had that same feeling,” 454ZQ2 confided, “but I was not certain.”

“A weak mental radiation has been coming from behind us for some time,” the professor pointed out, “but it has been so vague as to be scarcely perceptible. Now, it is growing a bit stronger.”

“I had better fly back over our route and find out who follows us,” 6W-438 suggested.

There was general agreement to this, and the machine man disappeared into the star-lit sky. He was not long gone and returned, a growing blot against the twinkling stars, to alight beside them and report.

“Chebs. Quite a large number of them, from what I could gather. They have smelled Klaemten and have also found their dead companions. Those without intelligence are for chasing down the scent of Klaemten, but the smart ones are wary and hold the others in check. They are moving up closer all the time, but the dead ones have made them careful.”

“What shall we do?” queried 12W-62. “Dare we enter the mines with them watching us?”

“They can do us no harm,” said 454ZQ2. “Klaemten will be safer there with us than he would be out here in the open, in case we should be rushed by more of the Chebs than we could handle all at once.”

As they moved across the low, flat hills, the mental radiations of the Chebs became more distinct. The animals were moving up faster. The machine men were now able to distinguish the difference in the mental radiations of the two species. The stronger ones were so intelligent as to astonish the machine men. The Chebs were curious

and wary over the strange tracks accompanying the scent of Klaemten. They had no idea that their mental radiations constantly betrayed them.

The entrance to the mines was surrounded by mounds of dirt, stones and ore. The mechanical progress of the Heolons was not very far advanced, judging by the crude mining methods they employed. There was no equipment whatever. All the work was done by Urgyul-power.

The shafts entered the ground on a long slant, with divergent shafts striking off like spokes of a wheel in various directions. Inside the mine, the Zoromes found more of the huge carts they had seen outside the mine, revealed in the illumination from their body lights. There were crude mining tools lying around, and from Klaemten the machine men learned that the miners were furnished with explosives by the Heolons.

Deeper and deeper they penetrated into the shaft they were descending. Turning into the divergent side passages, they marked their course well in order to return the way they had come and avoid being lost in a maze of underground tunnels.

"Nickel!" exclaimed 6W-438 exultantly, examining ore. "Mostly iron but there's nickel, too! Now, if we can only find copper somewhere on this world!"

They roved ever deeper into the mine, searching out its mysteries.

"The Chebs are closer," 12W-62 said. "They must have entered the mines."

The machine men paused to examine the emanations, but they were not very strong, and there were so many of them as to create a confusion of thought. The four Zoromes were able to gather little information other than the fact that their presence in the mine was known and that the attitude of the Chebs was a belligerent one. The Chebs were becoming bolder.

"Let them come," said Professor Jame-

son. "We are more than a match for them, especially in these narrow tunnels."

THEY came suddenly into a long tunnel broader than most of those they had traversed, when far ahead of them a flitting figure leaped away from their light.

Klaemten gave a gasp of dismay. "A Heolon!" he cried.

"That is strange," said the professor. "The Heolons seem able to conceal their thoughts."

"It is true that we have received no thought waves other than those of the Chebs," 12W-62 ruminated, plainly puzzled. "The brain construction of the Heolons must be something entirely different from anything we have yet encountered."

This was all over the head of the uneasy Urgyul. "What are we to do?" he asked his metal allies.

"We shall try to leave the mine and see if they attempt to stop us. Perhaps we can reason with them."

They started back. The machine men as yet saw no cause for alarm; but Klaemten who had been brave against the ferocious Chebs, betrayed an almost superstitious fear of the Heolons.

They were less than halfway back to the mine entrance when a terrific explosion rocked the area they had just left. Tons of rock roared down behind them, blocking the way by which they had come, sending a cloud of dust billowing around them. Choking and gasping, the startled Urgyul picked himself up and with a frightened yell began running. The machine men were swayed on their feet by the concussion but were not knocked over. Far ahead, they heard the running footsteps of Klaemten.

Then came another explosion from the direction the Urgyul had taken, and another cloud of dust billowed down the tunnel into the slowly settling residue of

the first, stirring it up into tricky whirls of airborne particles. A deluge of rock roared down into the tunnel ahead, accompanied by a rain of stones and rock fragments. The machine men remained motionless, awaiting a further blast which might well bury them alive. If the Heolons had meant to destroy them by planting charges in their path and then exploding them, the first had been delayed too long and the second one hurried. They might expect another. Klaemten had probably died in the second blast.

The dust settled slowly, and no longer did the beams from their body lights lose their illumination in a cloud of dusty particles. The rock falls in each direction became visible.

"They were not trying to destroy us!" Professor Jameson told his metal comrades. "Those explosions were set off with perfect timing to trap us!"

"Now that they have us caged, what will their next move be?" I2W-62 queried.

"To secure us by some means so that we will be harmless," mused the professor.

The four machine men of Zor were aware of plotting against them but were not sufficiently well acquainted with the synthetic intellect of the Chebs to discover the exact nature of the plans. There was a virtual babble of thought reaching them, yet never were they able to contact the higher mentality guiding and directing the Chebs. One thrill of discovery proved to be a false alarm on closer examination. A new mental phase struck into the thought radiations picked up by the machine men, but it was not an intellect superior to the Chebs. Daylight had returned, and with it the return of the Urgyuls to the mine.

The machine men waited patiently in their dark tomb.

"We might clear a way through one of the rock falls eventually," said Professor Jameson, "but we shall probably hear from the Heolons long before that."

And he was right, although contact with the Heolons came in an odd and unexpected way.

"Water is dripping into the cave," I2W-62 announced. "It has only commenced, for it was not here before. See."

In the illumination spread by I2W-62's body lights, the machine men saw a slowly spreading pool of liquid on the floor of their sealed-up tunnel.

"The flow is increasing!" 6W-438 exclaimed.

"Do they think to drown us?"

No one answered the query of 454ZQ2. They stood and watched the liquid before them ripple down into the tunnel in a dark stream.

"Is it water?" Professor Jameson suddenly startled them. He had been watching the action of the liquid closely and had noted that dust particles did not float on its surface where its pool ever broadened. "It may be some liquid dangerous to metal!"

"We shall soon know," said 6W-438, impetuously dipping the tip of a tentacle into the liquid. "I only hope that if it is of a destructive nature, the destruction will not be progressive."

"If it is, we shall remove your tentacle before the danger reaches your body," the professor assured him.

Keeping a respectful distance from the spreading pool of mysterious liquid, the machine men watched with rapt attention what effect, if any, the liquid would have upon 6W-438's tentacle.

"It is not commencing to dissolve or drip away, at least," said the machine man.

"But the spot where you placed the liquid is turning dark," said 454ZQ2.

"And the liquid is drying, it seems," Professor Jameson observed.

"Look!" 6W-438 said. "It has added its composition to my tentacle. It is hard and metallic."

"It may be an element found here in



the mines of the planet," 12W-62 suggested.

Professor Jameson expressed negation. "Do you know what will happen if this tunnel fills up with the stuff?"

There followed a pause for thought; then 6W-438 voiced the inevitable result. "We would be held securely in the center of a block of this solidified liquid."

**"THE FLOW** has stopped!" 12W-62 announced after some time had passed.

It was true. A pool comprising several gallons lay in a low part of the tunnel floor where it had slowly trickled after coursing down the wall from the crevice.

They did not again turn off their lights but stood and watched the pool and the crevice near the ceiling from which it had filtered. The dark pool on the floor reflected the beams of their body lights like an ominous and baleful eye.

6W-438 was first to break the sinister vigil. He moved closer to the shallow pool and circled it slowly.

"It has become smaller," he announced. "It has found a vent."

"There is no place for it to run off," said the professor. "It may be evaporating."

Now that 6W-438 had drawn their attention to it, all four machine men noticed a tiny, barely perceptible shrinkage of the liquid.

"Whatever they meant to do, they have failed," 12W-62 said. "The liquid is drying up."

If the Heolons' plan had really failed, as seemed to be the case, they would undoubtedly try something else. But perhaps they would find it necessary to blast through the rubble, and in that event the machine men would have a chance of escape.

All four Zoromes were engrossed with these thoughts when 454ZQ2 shocked them with an alarming discovery.

"I cannot move!"

The statement was so startling that his three companions could only stare at his motionless figure and penetrate his open and startled mind to see if he were making an effort. He was, and their immediate reaction was to make some motion to assure themselves that they were not in a like condition.

"Nor can I!" 6W-438 exclaimed. He made a mighty effort, and staring from his circle of eyes he saw that both the professor and 12W-62 were standing motionless.

"Static interference!" 454ZQ2 blamed their condition on interference of their mental control. "The Heolons have nullified our impulses!"

"No, it is not that," Professor Jameson told them in calm resignation. "If it were so, we should receive some inkling of it in our brains. It is the liquid."

"The liquid! But how?"

"Evaporation. It is like dew. Now, I see it all. Look upon your bodies and you will see tiny beads of it. Many of these tiny beads of 'dew' have already fused. You can see them if you watch. It is picked up in the air and is attracted to us like moisture to blades of grass and other vegetation. The tiny globules have settled and fused in our joints. That is why we cannot move so much as a tentacle. Our joints are petrified with a material too tough for us to break."

"We can offer no resistance to capture," 6W-438 observed gloomily.

"It is what they planned. They have only to come and destroy us or cart us away, whatever they will."

"Don't you think it strange, 21MM392, that they possess so detailed a knowledge of us that they could construct this clever means of overcoming us?"

"Yes. We may be dealing with an intelligence greater than our own, or at least in a capacity in which we find ourselves at a disadvantage."

The four statuesque machine men discussed their dilemma and waited for the next move. It finally came in the heraldic roar of another explosion. This was almost above their heads and was less intense than the two preceding ones. Only a small amount of rock fell this time, revealing a hole in the ceiling. A head was cautiously lowered through the hole, a spherical head from which a pair of deep-set eyes solemnly contemplated the four rigid Zoromes. It was an Urgyul. The head was drawn back, and the machine men, anticipating the result, heard a report given of their condition. This was followed by a general order from the intelligent Chebs, and the Urgyuls came tumbling down into the blocked tunnel, a score of them.

Fearfully, one by one, they crept to the nearest machine man, who happened to be 6W-438. Laying their fleshy tentacles upon him, they found him no more dangerous than a piece of the rock fallen from the tunnel ceiling. They gathered him up and carried him to the hole in the ceiling of the tunnel where they pushed him above their heads to waiting tentacles lowered to receive him.

All four Zoromes were efficiently dispatched in a like manner, finding themselves on a higher level of the mine and surrounded by Urgyuls and the sinister, slinking Chebs. None of these carnivorous animals present were of the unimproved type. All had been given intelligence by the mysterious Heolons. Like valuable metal images, the four machine men were picked up by the Urgyuls and brought out of the mine into the light of day. Then commenced the long trek over the hills to the city of Thoth.

They found Thoth a weird and fantastically built city of architecture without geometric planning. The buildings were long and low. Never were there two stories, and the machine men saw no sharp corners or angles on the buildings

or their entrances. Everything was curved and rounded. They saw no creatures in the city other than the Chebs and Urgyuls.

THE URGYULS carried the machine men into one of the longest buildings. The Zoromes were deposited in an open spot before a rostrum. On this broad dais, they at last obtained their first sight of the Heolons. The remaining area of the place was filled with Chebs, and the Urgyuls who had brought them were promptly dismissed.

The machine men were not highly impressed with the Heolons, at least not physically, for they presented a rather sorry picture.

The Heolons were taller than the Urgyuls but appeared weak, indolent and emaciated. The machine men probed their mental capacities, and with a shock realized that their mentality was identical with that of the Chebs. Their mental structures were the same.

One of them stood up. His legs were longer than those of the Urgyuls, his body straight and slender and surmounted by an elongated head. A wide mouth, protruding eyeballs and antennae instead of ears completed his physiognomy. The Heolon had a pair of jointed arms which ended not in fingers but in four short, wriggling tentacles which the professor readily recognized as far more efficient than fingers.

"We cannot read your thoughts," the standing Heolon radiated, "though we are aware that you can impress your thoughts on our brains and can receive our mental ideas."

"How did you know this?" the professor asked.

"Klaemten told us. He was captured when he tried to escape from the mine."

"Then he did not die beneath the rock fall from the explosion."

"No. He was entirely uninjured and

suffered only a bad fright as these ignorant creatures are wont to do."

"Why do you keep us helpless?" 6W-438 demanded.

"Because it is reported that you have killed three of the exalted Chebs and possibly other Chebs not yet raised to the honor of parity with the honorable and ancient Heolons. You are wrongly sympathetic with the boorish and uncultured Urgyuls."

"They are boorish and uncultured only because you have enslaved them and kept them that way," the professor pointed out. "They have never been given a chance."

The Heolon ignored this remark. "You are wanderers from a distant world beyond Oag, we learn," he said. "It must be wonderful to fly beyond the atmosphere of worlds on your metal wings."

Evidently, the machine men thought, Klaemten had not told the Heolons all he had learned of the Zoromes. They did not know of the existence of the spaceship.

"We came here in a friendly spirit and are sorry we found it necessary to kill your animals who hunted and would have devoured another intelligent being."

Again, there was an avoidance of an argument on this question, and the Heolon pushed his own subject of conversation to the fore. "We have need of your intellect here in solving a problem which has us baffled," the Heolon informed them. "If you can help us, we shall let you go free, providing you leave this world and do not return. Otherwise, you die. We shall be sure that the all-important brains in your metal heads are destroyed. I shall explain the problem. To begin with, you may have wondered at the similarity of our mental structure with that of the Chebs."

"We did," Professor Jameson replied. "But not until we entered here did we realize it. You see, we believed your mental activity to be that of the Chebs and feared that your own thoughts were be-

yond our perceptions. A serious error."

"And do you not understand now? You should."

"Brain transposition. That can be the only answer. It is how you give the Chebs intelligence. Instead of transferring your brains to machines, as we have done, you have transferred them to members of another species."

"Yes, a healthy, virile and particularly well-built animal. Our own race has been degenerating physically for the past thousand years or more, and we have sought an answer to our problem in this means of giving ourselves a happy, healthy life we cannot enjoy in our original forms."

"What, then, is your problem for which you believe we might possibly have a solution?"

"Ours is a dying race. We can transfer our brains to the skulls of the Chebs, but we have found no way to reproduce intelligent Chebs. The offspring are savage beasts which we are able to command and control but who show no signs of intelligence. Meanwhile, the Heolons are a dying race. We shall be gone from the face of Bhém in a thousand years or less."

"Yours is a hopeless problem," the professor replied pessimistically. He retained the thought, however, that it might be a good thing if the Heolons did die out, and the Chebs reverted entirely to their savage state. The Urgyuls would then be free and would advance to a position of culture and civilization undeserved by the indolent and supercilious Heolons. "Your way is a hard way," he said. "Through the Chebs lies the race suicide of the Heolons. The flesh and blood Zoromes on the planet Zor do not keep slaves to labor for them, and thus their race continues and flourishes. The only way the Heolons can survive is to free the Urgyuls and take over the labors and hardships which the slave race now bears. By making the

Urgyuls slaves you are destroying both races."

"You suggest that we treat the Urgyuls as equals?" another Heolon rose and demanded amid a general mutter of indignation. "Let them exploit this world with us?"

"We have an answer for that problem, at least," Professor Jameson explained. "It has become an axiom among us, we have found it to hold true again and again in our journeying from world to world, that two intelligent species cannot live peacefully on the same world together. Fortunately, a solution exists here. One of your races can migrate to Oag. We can help you in this. If you want to remain here on Bhém, let the Urgyuls go, or go to this large moon yourselves and let them stay here. The moon is ideal for inhabitation. We have visited it and know."

## CHAPTER THREE

### Madness in the Crypt

**I**NSTANTLY, all the Heolons were in an uproar. Almost as one they denounced the machine men as lying, cheating emissaries of the Urgyuls. "The idea is preposterous and impossible. And even if it were within the wildest realm of possibilities, we should not think of freeing the Urgyuls and doing their menial tasks. You will be taken away to think better upon the fate which awaits you. You will be allowed the chance to give the problem serious consideration, and if you value your continued existence, think in terms of advantage to the Heolons and not to the lowly, ignorant Urgyuls!"

A delegation of the lowly, ignorant Urgyuls was called back in to carry off the machine men to a place of imprisonment. As a precautionary measure, their mechanical wings were torn off, bent or otherwise made useless. Like most of the

buildings in Thoth, their jail was without doors and with open windows. The Heolons were satisfied that their metal prisoners were secure, and aside from the occasional vigilance of their slaves, a few of which were detailed outside, needed no further safeguards.

The machine men were given plenty of time to think. They now knew the secret of the intelligent Chebs. They were transmogrified Heolons who had combined their intellects with the physical perfection of beasts, carnivorous beasts. The ultimate fate of every Urgyul slave was to become food for these beasts.

"Is there a way by which the intelligent Chebs might perpetuate their synthetic species?" 12W-62 asked his companions.

The three Zoromes expressed negation. Their mechanical genius had nothing to offer which the Heolons themselves had overlooked.

"We must stave them off with artifice to gain time," 6W-438 insisted. "We must invent something plausible for them."

"They are not easily fooled," Professor Jameson pointed out.

The machine men made earnest efforts to free themselves, but their petrified joints would not move. Not so much as a tentacle wriggled. They might each have been cast in a single piece of metal. The heat ray built into one of Professor Jameson's tentacles responded, but it could not be directed and so was useless. At intervals, one of the Urgyuls guarding them looked inside. A long period of time passed in this manner.

One night, however, the visiting Urgyul did not leave after his preliminary examination of the dimly-visible machine men. He stood there, and the focal attention of the four Zoromes swung curiously upon him.

"Klaemten!" the professor exclaimed in recognition of the Urgyul's thought pattern. "What are you doing here?"

"I have come to free you," he explained.

"I could have come before, possibly, but it would have done no good, for I had no way of doing anything for you. But now I have. It is a preparation which, when rubbed into the places where your metal parts stick together, will free you."

"Quick! Rub it on!"

The Urgyul went about his work, rubbing a heavy grease into the movable parts of the machine men, explaining as he worked.

"I passed the second rock fall just in time. Then I was captured and made to tell what manner of creatures you were. I withheld as much as I could, knowing that there were more of your companions on Bhém and hoping that possibly they might come. I expected to be eaten by the Chebs, but such action was overlooked or deferred in the general excitement of your capture. By happy circumstance, I was drafted into assistant's work in one of the laboratories. I made the most of my opportunities, and besides finding a solvent for the liquid which hardens and fuses with metal, I also spied on the resurrection of one of my brethren to be given alive for the satisfaction of several Chebs." At this point, Klaemten was unable to repress a shudder at memory of the gruesome spectacle. "It is quite simple, I found, if one has a plunger and needle containing the right kind of fluid mixed for the purpose."

"You stole one," 6W-438 anticipated.

Klaemten agreed, passing from 454ZQ2 to Professor Jameson with his receptacle of grease. "Work your legs and tentacles," he told 454ZQ2. "They will loosen up gradually. I have also found where Eulud is kept with many others," he resumed. "I want to take her with me when we escape."

With energetic efforts, 454ZQ2 succeeded in producing feeble movements. These were conducive to greater success, until the machine man was able to move about almost normally.

"What of the guard outside?" the professor asked.

"I changed with one of them tonight. This is my period of responsibility to make the inspections. I was not recognized as the Urgyul caught in the mine with you. By the way, since I was caught I have helped two of my brethren to escape to the mountains. When we win free of Thoth with Eulud, those in the mountains will be on the watch for us to come."

Professor Jameson was now free of the clinging fusion, but his movements were still somewhat difficult. He believed that with a bit of exercise the machine men would function normally and have perfect use of their legs and tentacles. Not until 12W-62 and 6W-438 were similarly treated by Urgyul and had regained command of themselves did the machine men stir about to any great extent. It would not do for those on guard to hear sounds and commence to wonder why their fellow guard had not returned.

"Use the window," Klaemten warned them. "The guards are all on the other side sitting on the ground by the door."

The machine men climbed quietly out of the window and into the shadows. Oag was shining, and it would not do for a wandering Cheb or an Urgyul slave to see them. The Urgyuls recognized in them only formidable metal monsters capable of destruction and death. They had no idea that the machine men were their friends, and it would have been difficult offhand to convince them of the fact. Following Klaemten through the shadows, they headed in the direction of the tapered, streamlined building which led to the underground crypt where the Urgyul had seen Eulud.

**A**LL FOUR Zoromes noticed a lack of smoothness in their gait, and the greasy residue which was wearing out of their joints grated harshly.

As they neared the shadow of the building which was their destination, they passed a patch of moonlit ground. Professor Jameson became aware that the rolling, weaving sensation he experienced while walking was no illusion. His three metal comrades were going through the same loose, ungovernable motions. It suddenly occurred to him what was happening to them, and he radiated his discovery.

"We are becoming loose-jointed. The mixture of solvent and metal fluid has formed an abrasive. Our joints no longer fit snugly or evenly."

"Go more quietly!" Klaemten warned them, for though they trod lightly, their leg joints rattled.

They stopped outside, and Klaemten counseled them further. "There will be a Heolon and possibly a Cheb inside the entrance. You must use force in overcoming them. The Urgyuls whose life forces are held in suspension are below in the crypt and are laid on shelves. They are guarded by a mad Urgyul with an acid ejector. This acid can burn through flesh but will not harm you. He may well be asleep, for he follows the habits of the Heolons and Chebs, and they do nothing except by daylight. The crypt is vast and covers a great deal more territory than the building above it. We are standing over it, now."

"This Urgyul is mad?" queried 6W-438.

"Yes. The Heolons experimented with his brain when he was quite young. He never leaves the place and does not know anything of the world outside. He believes he is the last living Urgyul, and he watches jealously to see that none of the Urgyuls he believes dead come to life again. No Urgyuls are ever allowed to enter the crypt. Were they to go there, he would kill them with spurts of acid and triumphantly lay their bodies on a shelf."

"We had best watch our chance, creep up to the entrance and rush inside," said

the professor. "The faster, the better."

The others agreed. Around the oval end of the building they crept. They saw a light shining from the open doorway. At a signal, the machine men rushed in simultaneously, catching a pair of startled Heolons who uttered exclamations of surprise but could make no further outcries as the tentacles of the machine men fastened about their weak bodies. The Heolons made but a few futile motions and died—less horribly than the countless Urgyuls they had condemned as food for the Chebs.

Klaemten and the machine men found no further opposition, and the Urgyul pointed to a broad flight of steps leading into a dimly-lit level below. He enjoined caution upon them, and they proceeded as quietly as slow stealth would render their loose, creaking joints.

Step after step they descended, and they became aware of a scented odor peculiar to the sepulchral errand they were upon. Their first view of the crypt where the Urgyuls lay in suspended animation was one of numerous broad columns like the lower trunks of trees in a forest. These columns were hollow shelves, and on these shelves lay the quiet, deathlike bodies of the Urgyuls waiting to be revived and given as food to the Chebs.

At the foot of the broad steps Klaemten bade them halt, while he peered through the dismal forest of hollow columns towards each far end of the gloomy crypt. He found his bearings and motioned them to follow him. In spite of the extreme care the machine men used in following the Urgyul, the sound made by their loose joints seemed a veritable bedlam in the unnatural silence of this place. Klaemten finally stopped at a column and looked in upon the middle one of five vertical shelves forming one side of the five-sided pillar. The machine men looked in curiously at Eulud. She appeared similar to Klaemten except that she was smaller and her head was more oval. Excitedly, Klaem-

ten pressed the needle into her shoulder and pushed the plunger. He withdrew the needle and watched anxiously in mingled hope and fear.

"Her color is changing," said 6W-438 encouragingly.

"Her brain is starting to function, too," 454ZQ2 announced to the delighted Urgyul. "I find traces of disordered thought."

Klaemten finally saw her stir. "Eulud!" he whispered.

She opened her eyes and looked about her uncomprehendingly. Then she saw Klaemten and the weird figures beyond. Both bewilderment and fright were mirrored in her wide eyes.

"Have no fear!" Klaemten enjoined her. "Make no alarm! We have come to take you away from here!"

Startled, yet trustful, Eulud allowed Klaemten to assist her out of the shelf and to her feet. She withdrew in fear from the machine men, but Klaemten reassured her. They headed for the stairs, the machine men once more moving with as little noise as possible but still aware that had there been any wide-awake vigilance in the crypt they would surely have been heard.

They were just congratulating themselves that the wild guardian Klaemten had described was fast asleep and that they would again reach the upper level without discovery, when a wild, screeching laugh greeted them from the stairs they must ascend in leaving the crypt. Midway on the stairs stood as wild and demoniac a figure as the machine men had ever met in their travels. Madness lay on his contorted features. His brain radiated hateful, distorted thoughts. Menacingly his outthrust tentacles held a strange instrument in which the machine men had been told lay a flesh-consuming acid. It was the mad Urgyul.

"The dead will try to live, will they?" he challenged, his voice rising just short

of a scream. "Get back to your places and stay dead!"

He emphasized this last by creeping stealthily down the stairs and coiling his tentacles ready to hurl the deadly acid at them. He showed no surprise or wonder at sight of the machine men. Possibly he was accustomed to see strange figments conjured by his imagination which were just as real to him as these four Zoromes.

As the mad Urgyul stole softly down the steps to be within hurling distance with his acid, Klaemten retreated with Eulud to a safe distance. Onward came the mad Urgyul, the machine men standing their ground unflinchingly. With a sudden wild scream of exultation, the mad Urgyul sprayed them with several discharges from the acid ejector so that it dripped and ran down their metal bodies. Seeing Klaemten and Eulud in the background, he raised an unholy shout and din and darted at them, only to be caught in a looping tentacle by 6W-438.

Professor Jameson stepped forward, and from his fore tentacle there shot a bright, gleaming shaft of death which illuminated the grisly crypt and forever silenced the mad Urgyul. His acid ejector lay on the floor, its last discharge having fallen perilously close to Klaemten.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Fighting Heads

THE SOUND of voices above, and the mental unrest detected by the Zoromes, indicated that there was no more necessity for caution. Up the stairs they ran, weaving and clanking unsteadily upon their four metal legs, their tentacles jerking and rattling loosely. At the top, they were met by a horde of Chebs and Urgyul slaves barring their passage. Below, in the edge of the deeper gloom, Klaemten saw, too, and his hopes for Eulud and himself fell. It was from

Professor Jameson that he received quick advice. The professor radiated the final command of the mad Urgyul.

*"Get back to your places and stay dead!"*

Klaemten puzzled over this command only for a moment. No one but the mad Urgyul had seen Eulud and himself. Quickly he urged Eulud back among the silently populated columns of the crypt. He helped her back into her old position.

"The Heolons will not know differently. We may get a chance to escape, or the machine men may return and help us if they win free. If we are caught now, we may expect but one end."

Leaving Eulud with wildly beating heart, Klaemten found a vacant shelf in a nearby column and composed himself in spite of the din from above, where the machine men charged the assemblage of Heolons and their minions.

Professor Jameson and his three metal companions gained the top of the steps and found themselves the center of a milling, fighting throng of Chebs and Urgyul slaves, urged on by Heolons who kept discreetly to the rear. Perhaps those up front, having seen the machine men docile and immovable, may have underestimated their powers of destruction, or, unable to escape because of the press from behind, found themselves suddenly at grips with the metal monsters from another world. Suffice it to say, however, that there was a devastating carnage and terror among the foremost who seized upon the machine men amid a flailing and tightening of metal tentacles and threshing metal feet. Chebs and Urgyuls screeched in maddened pain, too, when coming in contact with the acid cast upon the four Zoromes by the mad Urgyul. The professor's heat ray wove a path of death about him, and he led the way through the jostling, clamoring creatures.

There were sudden orders by the Heolons which drew away the mass of

obstructing Chebs and Urgyuls, and the machine men found their way to the outdoors again. They lumbered unsteadily outside and were met with squirts of liquids directed upon them by agile Urgyul slaves with ejector guns.

"21MM392!" 6W-438 exclaimed, watching a globule of the liquid on one of his upheld tentacles. "It is that infernal substance which fuses our joints!"

The Urgyuls darted in for another liquid attack, running away as the machine men lunged awkwardly at them on metal limbs already so badly corroded from the fusion and subsequent solvent as to be difficult of management and speed. Encouraged by their initial success, the Urgyul minions of the Heolons darted in close, even stopping to take accurate aim at the leg joints of the Zoromes. The professor killed a few with his heat ray, but they were careful after that to keep out of effective range, directing most of their attention on the remaining Zoromes in spite of the professor's awkward attempts to protect them all.

"We must head for those distant mountains!" he told his companions.

"It is so far!" 454ZQ2 objected.

"But our best chance! Keep moving and the liquid may not have a chance to set!"

They fought their way clear of Thoth, but still the militant hordes followed, surrounding them at a safe distance and keeping up their attempts to overcome the machine men. The four Zoromes were robbed of their usual speed by the condition of their leg joints, and they occasionally staggered and fell, often tripping themselves in trying to run faster.

"My legs are commencing to work better!" 454ZQ2 exclaimed, as they left Thoth far behind them. "They are not so loose!"

As if to prove his statement, he pulled farther ahead of the harrassing horde which kept constant pace behind them,



many of them running up front while others flanked them. Only a few Heolons still remained, however, the rest having become exhausted and returning to Thoth. Chebs formed a large part of the horde and kept up an incessant screeching. Most of them were transmogrified Heolons and directed the Urgyul slaves in an animal dialect the Urgyuls had been taught to understand and obey.

"My joints are not so loose, either," 6W-438 observed, with less enthusiasm than the discovery would appear to warrant. "You know what it means? It means that the liquid has added its bulk to our bodies at this point."

There was ominous portent in this. The truth of 6W-438's assertion was realized as all of the machine men but the professor reported a tightening of their joints from the continual liquid attack. The professor kept the Urgyuls with their ejectors at a respectful distance, but he was shot at nevertheless and occasionally hit.

What Professor Jameson feared began to happen. The joints of the machine men became so tight as to make movement difficult and forced. 12W-62 developed a stiff leg which slowed him up. He lagged behind and was beset more boldly with the liquid ejectors. 6W-438 was next to feel the effects of the attack, and the Chebs screamed in triumph as he came to a dragging stop, only one leg able to move. 12W-62 was next. That left only 454ZQ2 and the professor, who tried his best to protect them both, managing to kill one of the more audacious Urgyuls with his heat ray and fuse the creature's weapon into a mass of hot metal, but by this time 454ZQ2 could scarcely walk.

"Hurry onward, 21MM392! Leave me and escape before you, too, are made helpless! Your best chance is to get into the mountains and somehow contact 744U-21 and some of the others. These slaves of the Heolons will take us back

to Thoth. We shall try to keep them from destroying us until help arrives."

Professor Jameson recognized the wisdom of this. He left 454ZQ2 to the howling horde, which swarmed around him once the professor and his dreaded heat ray had departed. Within a few minutes he was unpleasantly surprised to find himself making better speed. His joints were not so loose as formerly. This had been only a temporary advantage with his companions, he knew, and the final result had been capture by the same resolute pack still swarming after him. But if the tightening of his rattling joints were ominous in what it presaged, at least it gave him added speed when he most needed it. Luckily, his pursuers were becoming exhausted. The last Heolon had dropped behind even before the first machine man had been overcome. The Urgyuls were lagging in their attack, and only the Chebs retained a tireless tenacity of purpose.

WITH the coming of daylight, the professor found the mountains still a long way off but more clearly visible. Ahead of him, he saw a cloud of dust and wondered at it. Then he heard sounds of many voices. A few of the Chebs still dogging his tracks also heard them and pricked up their ears. Coming upon a little rise, the professor saw a large band of Urgyuls approaching. The Chebs following him screeched exultantly. Even at a great distance, the machine man detected an object carried by each Urgyul which might be one of the long ejectors. If there were Heolons and Chebs in the reinforcements, they kept to the rear. He wondered what means of communication the Heolons possessed by which forces from another village could be signaled and sent out to cut off his escape.

He watched the Chebs running joyfully to meet the reinforcements. He lingered in the shelter of a bush.

He heard and saw the Chebs returning, and the Urgyuls came on behind at what seemed a more rapid pace than formerly. As he watched, the professor could not but notice that the return of the Chebs to lead the reinforcements upon him was less triumphant than their advance. There were several Urgyuls hard upon the hindmost of the Chebs and something long and white lashed out to catch the Cheb and send him into a howling, threshing mass of pain and fury. Several Urgyuls surrounded the transmogrified Heolon and put him to death with other spears as the astonished machine man looked on. The remainder of the Chebs rushed past the professor in fright and did not stop.

The professor's hopes rose. If these Urgyuls were not slaves and allies of the Chebs and Heolons, then they were free Urgyuls and must be from the mountains. Professor Jameson rushed forth to meet them. They halted in a cloud of obscuring dust, so that their ranks were but cloudily seen. In their minds, Professor Jameson grasped recognition, yet he had never seen them before nor they him.

"You are from the mountains?" he asked them.

"Yes. We are marching upon Thoth to free our enslaved people. They will fight when we come in force. You are not one of those machine men who went to free the four who are prisoners in Thoth? Then you must be one of the four. Did they free you?"

"What others?" asked the astonished professors. "Klaemten, a runaway Urgyul who was captured with us, helped us to escape, but three of us have just been recaptured."

"Then you do not know that during the darkness eight machine men like yourselves flew from our mountains upon Thoth. They went to free you and prepare for attack on the city."

"No. How did they come to be in the mountains?"

"They came searching for you four who had been long unreported. Slaves from Thoth freed by Klaemten had previously reached us and told wonderful stories about you. So we were not too surprised when eight of your number came looking for you."

"Then on to Thoth!" Professor Jameson urged them.

It was a long march to the city, and they came in sight of it in the late afternoon. Machine men flew above it, drawing the attention of the Heolons, Chebs and enslaved Urgyuls who had no protection against the depredations of the winged Zoromes. One of them flew to meet the Urgyul army.

"21MM392! You did escape, after all! We feared that something might have happened to you!"

"I was the only one who escaped, 41C-98. The other three were taken."

On the city's edge, the eight flying Zoromes and the army of free Urgyuls from the Mlopt Mountains held a council of war with the professor.

"We do not know where 6W-438, 454ZQ2 and 12W-62 have been taken," said the machine man, "but it is probable that they are somewhere in the center of the city, and we shall fight our way to that area. It will be easier if we can persuade the Urgyul slaves to turn on their masters and join us."

"Leave that to us!" Uberup, the leader of the free Urgyuls urged spiritedly. "It is for them and the future of our race that we fight."

"Our flying contingent will harass and beat down any resistance we may encounter," said the professor. "I am glad to see that you came armed with blast guns."

With the winged machine men flying above them, the invaders of Thoth found no opposition until they were inside the city. The cunning of the Heolons then made itself apparent. From all sides, a mass of Chebs and Urgyul slaves sudden-

ly surrounded and attacked them in such thick waves as to keep the flying Zoromes busy with their blasters, preventing the little army from being overwhelmed by sheer weight of numbers.

Above the bedlam of combat arose the cry of the free Urgyuls for their enslaved brethren to rebel. In the thick of the fighting, jostled and slashed at by three-edged swords the Urgyul slaves carried, Professor Jameson saw Chebs savagely destroy the Urgyuls who stood hesitant about attacking their free brethren from the mountains. The slaves were warned by these examples, and life-long servitude tipped the scales. Slaves fought the free mountaineers, but not with the fervor of the invaders.

Professor Jameson's heat ray wove a net of death about him, as he lunged forcefully into the barrier wall of Chebs and Urgyul slaves. One of the machine men flew too low and was seized by a tentacle as an agile Urgyul slave leaped high into the air. Others added their weight, and the machine man, 8L-404, was borne to the ground and held there, Urgyul slaves, prompted by the Chebs, battered at his metal head. Blasts from on high hampered the destructive effort but did not check it. The professor's heat ray at last freed the battered and staggered 8L-404 who could no longer fly but fought at the side of Professor Jameson.

Another slave, imitating the success of the first, caught hold of 41C-98. But instead of hauling down the flying Zorome, he himself was pulled aloft. 41C-98 flew to a great height and released the doomed Urgyul who fell screaming in mad terror to his death. Momentarily, this fascinating episode caused a lull in the fighting as both sides gazed aloft. Then the combat resumed with an intense fury. Slowly but surely, the outnumbered invaders forced back the Chebs and their slaves and neared the heart of Thoth and its public buildings. Thanks to the flying Zoromes,

the free Urgyuls were suffering but few casualties, though many were wounded. Lackadaisical fighting on the part of the majority of the Urgyul slaves was partly to blame for the success of the invaders. The continued urgings of the free Urgyuls to rebel had at least this much influence.

**A** MPLIFIED thoughts were suddenly hurled among the machine men. "Stop! Go back! Leave Thoth, or your three comrades whom we hold will die! No longer is there a chance of their escaping as they did before! Their legs and tentacles have been torn off, and their heads will be destroyed if you push any closer!"

The machine men hesitated.

"Retreat and leave the city, and no hand will be raised against you," continued the Heolon source. "Fight on, and your friends die before you can reach them."

"What shall we do?" 41C-98 inquired of the professor as he and his remaining six companions circled uncertainly over the little army.

"We must retreat," Professor Jameson admitted regretfully. "We cannot sacrifice 6W-438, 454ZQ2 and 12W-62 just to take this city. There must be some other way of freeing them in the future. We will be in a position to do the bargaining when our spaceship is repaired."

The professor made this situation clear to Uberup. The mountain leader, his brave but smaller forces surrounded by the slaves and their fierce masters, realized that he had failed to cause a revolt of the Urgyul slaves and that his success in coming this far had been largely due to the machine men. Reluctantly, he gave agreement to the terms.

The journey back was begun, but slowly. The mountaineers hated to return. The machine men took the situation philosophically, with an eye to the future.

They were less than a hundred yards

## PARASITE PLANET

from their point of furthest penetration and little more than started on their retreat from Thoth when a growing cry and clamor arose from the center of the city, the hubbub coming rapidly nearer, causing curiosity and concern among the Chebs.

"What is it?" the professor asked of the circling Zoromes.

Several of them flew back along their route towards the center of the city and soon returned.

"Many Urgyuls are coming this way!" 240Z-42 exclaimed.

"They are strangely attired!" added 60M-64.

"They are brandishing all manner of metal objects and have already killed Chebs in their way," 41C-98 announced. "They seem to have come out of a low, tapering building, but how so many of them could have been in that one place I cannot imagine, unless it has underground chambers."

"The crypt!" cried the professor in sudden understanding. "Someone has released the Urgyuls in the crypt!"

And now the roaring horde poured into the area where the retreating army from the Mlopt Mountains had paused with their metal allies. The machine men heard their voices roaring and chanting and by listening intently caught the gist of their words.

"Free the Urgyuls! Kill the Chebs and the Heolons! Turn on your masters! We have arisen!"

And so over and over in ceaseless repetitious chant. And now what the brave mountaineers had failed to do, these new and spectral appearing Urgyuls accomplished. The Urgyul slaves no longer fought for their masters against their free brethren and the machine men, but turned instead against the Chebs. There were no original and untransmogrified Heolons in sight. Among the machine men, only

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Professor Jameson recognized the new Urgyuls for what they were.

The new arrivals were the Urgyuls who had been held in suspended animation in the crypt, now miraculously arisen and inspiring the superstitious Urgyuls to revolt against their cruel masters. Many of the slaves took them for disembodied spirits. The Chebs seemed perplexed and bewildered. Professor Jameson looked for Klaenten but did not immediately see him. Meanwhile, the slaves in revolt exclaimed in awe or enthusiasm, according to the way in which recognition struck them.

"Father! My father! Look — his ghost!"

"Douak! Who's been gone these two years—suddenly reappeared!"

"Amorol!"

"Jalunud—my brother!"

And so on, as the arisen bodies from the silent and deathly crypt battered their way to join forces with the mountain Urgyuls and were reinforced on all sides by the swelling tide of slaves. Once more, the rejuvenated and reinspired mountaineers went into action, and the Zoromes on the wing picked off luckless Chebs no longer supported by their slaves and now facing superior numbers. But the Chebs fought with the fury of the beasts that they were.

As the resurrected Urgyuls merged with the mountain Urgyuls, Professor Jameson saw a strange sight. Out of the heart of the Urgyuls from the crypt moved a metal coned head devoid of its square body and held on high by one of the revived Urgyuls. It was the head of 6W-438, and behind were borne also the bobbing metal heads of 12W-62 and 454ZQ2. The flashing thoughts of 6W-438 explained the story of their decapitation.

"When we were captured, the Heolons had us brought back and put into the

## PARASITE PLANET

crypt, after which our legs and tentacles were removed. We found Klaemten and Eulud still lying on the shelves. Klaemten arose, and at our suggestion stole upstairs and found the laboratory deserted but the place well guarded outside. Klaemten brought down means of bringing all of the bodies in the crypt back to active life again, and he and Eulud worked rapidly in the task. We thought it well for them to remove our heads and instructed them in it. It was our initial plan to rush free of the city, preferably at night, unless discovery should prematurely force us to act. The Urgyuls would carry our heads with them to safety. But when Klaemten and others who had been resurrected overheard those outside telling of the attack by free Urgyuls and machine men, we struck at once."

The three divisions of Urgyuls and the machine men were soon in command of the city, organizing Urgyul slaves into a huge army to march upon the rest of the Heolon communities and unite the enslaved people.

"We shall yet do the dying Heolon race the favor they rejected," said the professor, and he related to Uberup and the others his plan for the two intelligent races to live on separate worlds.

The Urgyuls stared up at the gibbous orb of Oag in the night sky. "It would be a glorious adventure," Uberup enthused, "and we shall surely want to visit Oag when your spaceship is repaired, but do you realize how many trips you must make?"

"The trip is not far," said 6W-438, his metal head carried in the curled tentacle of 240Z-42, "and as for time, all time is ours, and your lifetime is but a fleeting part of it."

"And can Eulud and I go?" Klaemten asked of the machine men.

"You two will travel there on the first trip," Professor Jameson promised them.

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# THE SCIENCE FICTIONEER

Conducted by Frederik Pohl

Note: These books are reviewed as a service to you; they are not for sale through *Super Science Stories*. For information as to publishers' addresses, etc., send a stamped self-addressed envelope to Book Review Editor, care of this magazine.

*NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR* and *ANIMAL FARM* by George Orwell. Harcourt, Brace & Co.

With few exceptions, George Orwell's new book *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is undoubtedly the most successful science-fiction novel of the past decade. With editorial approval in half of the country's newspapers, distribution by a leading book club, an eight-page accolade in *Life* and a vigorous advertising campaign, it has found its way into the homes of hundreds of thousands of persons, here and in England. More than any other single book, it is what a member of the general reading public will think of when he hears the term "science fiction".

As a political tract, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is powerfully effective, for Orwell's future world of Thought Police, all-seeing telescreens and elaborate propaganda devices is a completely believable horror. But, like the author's earlier *Animal Farm*—a rudimentary allegory in which the animals revolt against their human masters, only to be betrayed by their own kind—the book has no meaning and no substance of its own. Orwell has been hailed as a twentieth-century Jonathan Swift, but the difference between them is the difference between a campaign speech

and Lincoln's Gettysburg address; one is politics, the other is art.

*THE THIRTY-FIRST OF FEBRUARY* by Nelson Bond. Gnome Press.

Here are thirteen short stories, mainly concerned with fantasy, by a writer skilled in the use of words. Bond—in this present collection, at any rate—has little to say to science-fiction and fantasy readers, for there is very little in the way of fresh ideas or daringly imaginative themes in *The Thirty-First of February*. But what he says is said with impeccably smooth writing, and there is little doubt that the book will find a wide audience.

Four of the thirteen stories—*My Nephew Norvell*, *The Cunning of the Beast*, *The Monster from Nowhere* and *Pilgrimage*—are science fiction, of which the first-named is probably the best. One—*The Sportsman*—contains no element of fantasy at all, while the remaining eight range from light-hearted ghost stories to the intricate and highly derivative *Five Lives of Robert Jordan*.

The book's extras include a jacket by James Gibson and a brief introductory poem by James Branch Cabell, both of more than routine interest.

*PEACE OR PESTILENCE* by Theodor Rosebury. Whittlesey House.

Biological warfare may not have been first imagined by science-fiction writers, but it is certain that—as in the case of atomic warfare—they have devoted more time and thought to it than any other members of the lay public. Here is a book which takes the question from the realm of fantasy and discusses it as a matter of cold, hard fact—what biological warfare is, what it can be expected to do, what it actually has done in the past. In *Peace or Pestilence* you will find answers to many of your questions about BW—and, significantly, you will find many questions with no answers at all, including the biggest question of all: “How do you know when a biological war has started?”

*THE BIG EYE* by Max Ehrlich. Doubleday & Co.

The time of this story is not too many years in the future; the place is California's Mount Palomar, where an astronomer working with the 200-inch “Big Eye” discovers a strange celestial body moving in an orbit that will eventually intersect the Earth's.

Needless to say, the public reaction to the astronomer's announcement of impending doom follows a predictable pattern: wars end, politics becomes meaningless, humanity passes through a period of growing chaos and disorder. If these phenomena are familiar to science-fiction readers it is because the theme has been handled so many times before; although Ehrlich's treatment is competent and handsomely written, there are few changes left to be rung on this plot.

*TRITON* by L. Ron Hubbard. Fantasy Publishing Co.

Hubbard's story of a man who swallowed a sea-demon and couldn't spit him out—first published under the title *The Indigestible Triton*—is an uproarious ad-

venture-fantasy of a specially entrancing sort. There is no detectable subtlety in this account of a human's adventures in Neptune's court beneath the sea, but it is fast and funny and altogether entertaining. The price—three dollars for a volume of less than 200 pages—seems a trifle high, but on all other counts it is enthusiastically recommended.

*THE GREEN CHILD* by Herbert Read. New Directions.

Two strange children, whose flesh is a curiously translucent shade of green, appear in a tiny English village in the middle nineteenth century; one dies, but the other survives to grow up and fall in love with an ex-adventurer named Oliver, whom she carries off to her birthplace in a cavern beneath the earth.

*The Green Child* is an exquisitely written little story; but, as fantasy, it has little to offer except for some rather entertaining descriptions of life in the subterranean world, where revered hermits play chords on banks of stalactites and the dearest wish of each inhabitant is to die and become petrified into solid, eternal rock.

*SEVEN OUT OF TIME* by Arthur Leo Zagat. Fantasy Press.

The late Arthur Leo Zagat is best remembered as a writer's writer; as a leader in The Author's League and a consistent crusader for authors' rights. But, though he had almost completely retired from the fantasy field in the last years of his life, he made many memorable contributions to science fiction a decade and more ago, of which *Seven Out of Time* is the first to be reissued in book form. This adventurous account of seven humans from all the ages of mankind, past, present and future, who join together to fight a strange battle on behalf of humanity, is not quite Zagat's best, but it is well worth reading all the same.



# POPULAR FILMS

## A GUIDE TO GOOD MOVIE-GOING FOR FICTION FANS

### Ted Palmer Picks:

**For A Western:** "The Streets of Laredo" with Macdonald Carey, William Holden, William Bendix, Mona Freeman, (Paramount). Technicolor.



When three badmen split up and two get into the Texas Rangers by mistake, there's trouble afoot, pard. William Holden and William Bendix are the hombres who turn good and refuse to tip off their former partner, Macdonald Carey, on big jobs. This leads to complications when Holden refuses to bring in Carey—a source of irritation to the Rangers. Bendix, however, goes after him and gets shot for his efforts. Holden, stirred to action, mixes it up and has a showdown. *There's plenty of chase, shooting and Mona Freeman in full color.*

\* \* \*

**For Adventure:** "Down to the Sea In Ships" with Richard Widmark, Lionel Barrymore, Dean Stockwell (20th Century-Fox).



Although they finally lower the boom on Bering Joy (Lionel Barrymore), the old whaling master, he still has time to indoctrinate his young grandson (Dean Stockwell) into the ways of the sea and whaling. Amid storms and icebergs, the old man tussles with his first mate (Richard Widmark), an 1887 ninety-day wonder. *For those that like some salt—in their pictures and their eyes.*

\* \* \*

**For Intrigue:** "The Bribe" with Robert Taylor, Ava Gardner, Charles Laughton, Vincent Price, John Hodiak (MGM).



Government agent Rigby (Robert Taylor), on an island off the coast of Central America, is in search of a gang which falsely condemns surplus airplane motors, reassembles and sells them at exorbitant prices in South America. In cracking the case, Rigby tangles with beautiful cabaret singer

(Ava Gardner), her drunken husband (John Hodiak) and several assorted villains. Pay-off comes when Rigby orders a raid on the plant which he has discovered and shoots it out with the leader of the gang (Vincent Price). *Some good villainy and ominous action.*

\* \* \*

**For Drama:** "Knock On Any Door" with Humphrey Bogart and John Derek (Columbia).



Ex-Skid Row lawyer, Andrew Morton (Humphrey Bogart), unintentionally causes Nick Romano (John Derek) to become one of the more undesirable citizens on the wrong side of the tracks. Although marriage temporarily halts Nick's career of gambling and small-time thieving, he returns to his bad ways when he can't make the grade on an honest job. Picked up for cop-killing, Morton agrees to defend Nick who he thinks is innocent. With a not guilty verdict almost won, the prosecutor insinuates that Nick's wife committed suicide because of his bad ways, and a dramatic scene ensues. *A somewhat grim but often powerful picture.*

\* \* \*

**For Mystery:** "Homicide" with Robert Douglas, Helen Westcott, Robert Alda (Warner Brothers).



A transient worker, looking for a job finds murder and murderers on a citrus ranch in California. After being threatened, he testifies that the ranch owner's death was accidental. His isn't, a few hours later, and Lieutenant Landers (Robert Douglas) has a hunch and some clues that lead him to an out-of-town hotel. Questioning the bartender (Robert Alda) the hat-check girl (Helen Westcott), he gets a lead and returns to the citrus ranch where he finds a piece of telephone cable wound up on the plow of the tractor. This is the tip-off on an illegal racing wire service scheme. *The sleuthing is better than average.*

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